

# Narratives and War

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## Explaining the Length and End of U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan

In May 2017, amid yet another intense national debate about increasing troops in Afghanistan, President Donald Trump asked Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), “How does this end?” Graham answered, “It never ends.” Soon after, Vice President Mike Pence implored Graham to give Trump an off-ramp, some kind of exit strategy. According to Bob Woodward, Graham responded, “It would never end.”<sup>1</sup>

Until Trump’s 2020 troop reduction and, especially, President Joe Biden’s 2021 decision to end combat operations entirely, Graham’s counsel seemed almost prophetic. Despite long-standing countervailing pressures at home (e.g., lobbying by advocates of restraint, public disdain for the war, as well as the pro-withdrawal sentiments of Biden and his two immediate predecessors), the United States stayed in Afghanistan for two decades.<sup>2</sup> What sustained this war for so long, and what allowed Trump to begin and Biden to complete the drawdown?

Conventional arguments in international relations about geopolitics, elites (e.g., “the Blob”),<sup>3</sup> and partisanship struggle to answer these questions. Given these shortcomings, this article turns to a new theory of war duration to explain the length and end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The approach centers, at the broadest level, on collective national will or purpose. It does so, more specifically, by focusing primary causal attention on a largely underappreciated yet historically important factor in U.S. foreign policy: strategic narratives.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Cited in Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), pp. 121–122.

2. On restraint, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

3. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, p. 18. Walt attributes the label “the Blob” for the U.S. foreign policy establishment to former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes.

4. On collective ideas and narratives, see Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National*

I define strategic narratives as collective national or public-level stories that form out of and center around traumatic events for a group. These events come to be viewed in existential terms as a danger to the national way of life. By collective, I mean that narratives are properties of groups or social facts, like culture. For a nation-state, a narrative becomes collectively salient because it restores order by explaining the pain, assigning blame, and, most importantly, setting lessons going forward to avoid a return to the pain of the past. These lessons are often reflected in a simple mantra—such as “No More Vietnams” or “Stop Terrorism”—that takes on a life of its own in ways that determine national interests to pursue abroad and shape policy debates over time.<sup>5</sup>

This article focuses on one especially important type of strategic narrative—the liberal narrative—in the history of U.S. foreign policy. A robust liberal narrative is distinguished by its lesson, notably the need to safeguard liberal political order abroad, “either by promotion (i.e., expanding democracy and liberal rights) or protection (i.e., preventing the spread of counter-ideologies to liberalism).”<sup>6</sup> The liberal narrative manifests in temporally unique variants such as the anti-fascist narrative of the 1930s and 1940s and the anti-communist narrative during the Cold War. With lessons to defend freedom and stop counter-ideologies from spreading, both shared a commitment to protect liberal political order, making them “liberal narratives.”<sup>7</sup>

Historically, liberal narratives like these affect policy through the contested nature of democratic politics. At key decision points about the use of force, powerful narratives augment in predictable ways some voices over others in policy debates. Specifically, by tapping into or drawing upon the lessons of a

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*Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew Yeo, *Activists, Alliances, and Anti-U.S. Base Protests* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

5. C. William Walldorf Jr., *To Shape Our World for Good: Master Narratives and Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1900–2011* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 5–14.

6. The liberal narrative and grand strategies—like liberal internationalism—are distinct social phenomena. Leaders may consider narratives in building grand strategies, but those narratives are not, in and of themselves, grand strategies. See *ibid.*, pp. 5–13.

7. The absence of this narrative does not imply an “illiberal” narrative space for the United States; rather, it means that the nation values less those policies that actively advance or protect liberal order abroad, meaning that the nation is more exemplarist than vindicationist, to use Jonathan Monten’s description. Jonathan Monten, “The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 112–156, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.29.4.112>.

prevailing narrative, agents gain influence by building policy discourses that increase leaders' perceived audience costs, which are defined as the "domestic political price" that leaders pay for choices that are at odds with strong public preferences.<sup>8</sup> Given a narrative's public salience, leaders fear potential electoral or policy losses and, in turn, tend to bring their decisions in line with these narrative-augmented discourses, sometimes against their better judgment.<sup>9</sup>

This strategic-narrative argument helps explain the length and end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The severity of the September 11 terrorist attacks coupled with the frequency of follow-on attacks globally by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) into the late 2010s generated and sustained a powerful collective story across the U.S. body politic of missed opportunities by U.S. leaders and a lesson to combat terrorism abroad. This anti-terrorism narrative is the most recent variant of a robust liberal narrative in the U.S. policy process. At various decision points, the narrative created space for promoters of war (especially in the U.S. military) to generate discourses that raised audience costs of inaction and politically boxed in presidents to sustain or expand the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Concerns about looking "soft" and not measuring up to narrative standards shaped the decisions of both President Barack Obama and Trump (early in his term) to stay engaged militarily. In recent years, narrative measures show that as the severity and frequency of terrorist attacks receded (i.e., collapse of the ISIS caliphate, absence of severe al-Qaeda attacks), the anti-terrorism narrative also lost policy salience. Moderators (in this case, civilian leaders and policy experts) gained leverage, audience costs of inaction declined, and restraint gained traction in policy debates. Like event-driven narrative dynamics (i.e., following the killing of Osama bin Laden) that allowed Obama to withdraw from Iraq in 2011, the national sense of purpose in Afghanistan waned, creating political space for Trump to decrease troops and for Biden to end the war entirely.

The strategic-narrative argument builds upon and fills important gaps in existing scholarship. In contrast to standard rationalist accounts, it explores the social construction of audience costs and offers new insights into how narra-

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8. Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), p. 821, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070282>.

9. James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (1994), pp. 577–592, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944796>.

tives shape policy outcomes. The argument also turns to the framework of cultural trauma to explain strategic narratives more systematically.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to some accounts that focus primarily on influential agents to explain how narratives form and endure, trauma theory draws primary attention to the importance of events (e.g., September 11). When collectively viewed as existentially dangerous, these events spark new narratives such as the anti-terrorism narrative. Similar follow-on events over time re-traumatize the nation, helping maintain the salience of the narrative as a lodestar for foreign policy for years or even decades on end. Among other things, this trauma framework best accounts for the long-standing vitality of the anti-terrorism narrative in U.S. politics that other arguments about narratives struggle to explain.

This article turns first to conventional explanations, specifically arguments centered on potential changes in Afghanistan's geostrategic value to the United States, the shifting partisan preferences of different presidential administrations, variation in elite ideological or consensus-based pressures, and shifts in civil-military relations. The second and third sections detail the strategic-narrative argument and methods. Sections four through six present the Afghanistan case studies. The article concludes with policy implications.

### *Existing Explanations for Why the U.S. War in Afghanistan Ended*

The war in Afghanistan was the centerpiece of U.S. forever wars across the first two decades of the 2000s. Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden conducted major policy reviews early in their administrations. The first two opted against withdrawal and increased troops instead—Obama by 30,000 in 2009 and Trump by 4,000 in 2017. Three years later, Trump began—and Biden completed—the withdrawal. What explains this change?

Standard explanations struggle to answer this question. Realists see no geostrategic value in nation-building wars like Afghanistan. Although the end of the war makes sense to realists, its duration does not.<sup>11</sup> Partisan arguments offer no clear explanation either—Obama (D) continued President George W.

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10. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

11. Stephen M. Walt, "How Not to Leave Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/23/how-not-to-leave-afghanistan/>; and Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, pp. 255–292.

Bush's (R) policy that Trump (R) also initially followed before shifting to withdrawal, which Biden (D) elected to continue.<sup>12</sup> Elite-based arguments fare poorly, too. For those who focus on elite ideology, reduced elite ideological concerns about Afghanistan over the past decade (e.g., Obama on the overreaction to September 11 and talks of terrorism as nonexistential) should have meant that the United States ended the war years ago. Therefore, why the United States stayed so long and what changed to allow Biden to leave when others could not is puzzling.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that ideology is irrelevant; it affects how narratives form, but in ways that the narrow focus in extant work on elites alone does not capture well.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, some scholars argue that a powerful establishment consensus aimed at sustaining U.S. "liberal hegemony" explains U.S. wars in the Middle East. In short, elites want forever wars and get what they want.<sup>15</sup> But if this theory is correct, then how did Biden end the war? As a constant, establishment consensus cannot explain this, nor can it explain many other decisions for retrenchment, such as Obama's choice in 2011 to withdraw all troops from Iraq and his refusal to enforce the Syrian "red line" in 2014.

Finally, I suggest that the strongest conventional argument comes from the civil-military relations literature. When the military enters the political fray with dire public warnings of danger ahead for the nation, some scholars argue that civil-military relations tilt toward the military in ways that often lead to strategically suboptimal outcomes, such as continuing stalemated forever wars. In contrast, these kinds of wars result in retrenchment only when civilians regain the upper hand, especially by muzzling the military in public.<sup>16</sup>

The problem with this argument is not that it is wrong. In fact, the strategic-

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12. Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 7–44, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.32.2.7>. Other counterarguments (e.g., economic strength, COVID-19, and the Iraq surge) also fare poorly.

13. Ronald R. Krebs, "Pity the President," *National Interest*, No. 148 (March/April 2017), p. 37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557376>; and Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: A New 'Global War on Terror,'" *Atlantic*, April 2016, p. 75.

14. For an extended discussion, see Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 17–19, 226 n. 57.

15. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*; and Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018), pp. 9–46, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00311](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00311).

16. For a survey, see Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 90–97, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00033](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00033).

narrative argument I develop here agrees that the balance between military leaders as powerful promoters of war and civilian leaders as moderators of war is important. Not surprisingly, then, when military leaders went public (or threatened to do so) in the Obama and Trump periods, civilian leaders capitulated, troops increased, and war continued. In the Biden period, however, civilians carried the upper hand, the military chose not to go public with its preferences to continue the fight, and the president ended the war. In a broad sense, the cases match civil-military expectations.

This argument's greatest shortcoming comes with explaining change, which is the main puzzle of this article. If the civil-military relations balance is critical to both the continuation of and the end to forever wars, such as the war in Afghanistan, why does that balance tilt one way or the other at different times? More specifically, why does the military go public sometimes and not others, why and how do the public appeals of the military generate pressure on civilian leaders, and under what conditions are civilians able to muzzle the military and, in so doing, gain more leverage over policy?

The politics of strategic narratives help answer questions like these. The civil-military balance generally favors the military when there is a robust liberal narrative—such as the anti-terrorism narrative from 2001 to 2018. The narrative gives military promoters (and their civilian supporters in government) an important political tool to build public pressure on civilian leaders in order to continue/expand war. Military leaders are most likely to go public (or threaten to do so) under such narrative conditions. Civilian leaders—fearful of the political costs of not measuring up to narrative standards (i.e., looking “weak” or “losing”)—capitulate to military pressure. But when a liberal narrative weakens, the civil-military balance often tilts toward the former. Military promoters find themselves on more tenuous ground in policy debates. In the absence of nationwide, narrative-driven fervor to intervene militarily in conflicts abroad, the military tends to hesitate about going public with its preferences for more force. As the public costs of looking weak recede with the weakened liberal narrative, civilians/moderators find more political space to assert themselves, both in internal debates and in public. Long wars such as the U.S. war in Afghanistan often come to an end.

In sum, the nexus between civil-military relations and strategic narratives provides deeper insights into why long wars endure and ultimately end. International relations scholars have shed a great deal of light on the former but not on the latter. For that reason, I now turn greater attention to the narrative side of this equation.

*Trauma, Narratives, and War*

Narratives are not new to the field of international relations. The existing literature on narratives faces two primary shortcomings, though.<sup>17</sup> First, scholars offer no clear explanation for why and when narratives shape policy outcomes, like decisions to continue or end forever wars. My attention to audience costs corrects for this. Second, in explaining how narratives strengthen and weaken over time, existing scholarship gives primary attention to narrators—especially the president in the U.S. context.<sup>18</sup> Although narrators (and sometimes presidents, as such) are important, these arguments tend to overlook how events shape strategic narratives' content and strength across time. In the mid-2010s, President Obama tried to re-narrate and dampen terrorism worries in the United States, for instance. He largely failed because most U.S. citizens viewed Obama's new story as being out of touch amid a surge in ISIS terrorist attacks. The president told the wrong story at the wrong time. Events matter.

I start with scholarship on collective trauma, which draws attention to two particularly important concepts: the *severity* and the *frequency* of events. Neil Smelser defines cultural trauma as "a memory accepted and given public credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event(s) or situation(s) which is a) laden with . . . affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions."<sup>19</sup> Building off this definition, trauma involves three stages that leave behind marks on society, essentially new prevailing narratives. The strategic-narrative argument starts with identity, which determines what a community values most. Stage one involves severe events that are perceived as an attack on these values, an existential challenge making them traumatic.<sup>20</sup> This severity produces deep emotional reactions—"disgust, shame, guilt . . . or anxiety"—for a community, which leads quickly to stage two of

17. For a more expanded discussion, see Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 19–24.

18. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, pp. 31–65, 269–274; and Stacie E. Goddard and Ronald R. Krebs, "Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), pp. 5–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.1001198>.

19. Neil J. Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, p. 44.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 44; and Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, pp. 1, 10. These kinds of challenges to national identity, values, and events—whether big (an invasion) or small (a bombing in a café)—can traumatize a nation.

trauma, notably a collective search for new “routines” and ways to “get by in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Above all else, the affected community looks to presumed wise figures in society for explanation and ways forward.<sup>22</sup>

Stage three of trauma—the formation of new collective narratives—emerges from these explanations. Many enter the fray amid severity, often telling competing stories. Specific kinds of severity resonate with the injured group in ways that privilege some stories over others.<sup>23</sup> As a result of the disquiet generated by certain events, some stories become affirmed, validated, and collectively labeled as “good.” Storytellers gain a hearing, according to Jeffrey Alexander, when they “represent social pain as a fundamental threat to . . . [a group’s] sense of who they are.”<sup>24</sup> If severe events repeat frequently, privileged stories resonate deeper and longer. High frequency re-traumatizes the collective, which makes the story indelible (i.e., “see, I told you so”) and helps sustain it over time as the new collective wisdom—or prevailing narrative—with new ways of being going forward.<sup>25</sup>

This latter element—new directions toward repair—is a natural part of trauma-generated narratives. Effective storytellers repeatedly narrate ways for “defense and coping,” drawing attention to “mistakes and how they may be avoided in the future” (i.e., blame and lesson).<sup>26</sup> These lessons are often encapsulated in slogans such as “no more Vietnams,” “no more 9/11s,” or “who lost China?” (which helped propel intervention in Korea and Vietnam). Lessons and severe event(s) are intrinsically connected in narratives—the latter gives meaning to the former.<sup>27</sup>

This trauma framework—centered on the severity and frequency of events—helps explain the emergence and cross-temporal strength of strategic narratives in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> For this article, I grant special attention to

21. Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2006), pp. 342, 345–346, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>.

22. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” p. 10. Agents may include authoritative figures such as politicians, priests, intellectuals, policy elites, or moral activists.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 10; and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 118–123, 130.

24. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” p. 11.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 15; and Smelser, “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” pp. 41–42, 45.

26. Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 5, 23, 201; and Smelser, “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” pp. 38–53.

27. Ron Eyerman, “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,” in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, p. 63.

28. On trauma theory and nation-states, see Emma Hutchison, “Trauma and the Politics of Emo-



one kind of trauma—external trauma—and the type of narrative that it tends to generate. Trauma theorists find that severe event(s) from some force outside a community leads to group unity around a story centered on protecting the ideals of the community—that is, “who we are”—as a means of defense or repair.<sup>29</sup> This external trauma helps explain the emergence and strength of liberal narratives (such as the anti-terrorism narrative) that centers on activism abroad to defend or promote liberal political order.

Liberal states (including the public in these states) view other states and developments in the international system through the ideological lens of their own regime type (i.e., identity)—they notice and worry about the plight of liberal order abroad because it threatens their own security.<sup>30</sup> The severe events most likely to spark stage one of trauma emerge when ideologically distant—in this case illiberal—rival(s) make strategic gains, especially through either a direct attack on the United States or a series of attacks on other kindred liberal or liberalizing states. Like the ideology literature in international relations, I argue that these kinds of strategic shifts are not objective, as realists expect. Instead, their impact on a polity is conditioned by state identity.<sup>31</sup> When these attacks produce civilian casualties and/or lead to the expansion of illiberal governments abroad, collective anxiety around existential danger to the national way of life rises exponentially. This sense of existential panic around high-severity events comes almost immediately after direct attacks (e.g., Pearl Harbor or September 11).<sup>32</sup> With indirect attacks on ideological kin, geographic distance from the target often means that it takes several accumulated attacks to generate the same collective sense of severity and, with that, collective trauma.<sup>33</sup>

Whether their pathway is direct or indirect, high-severity attacks lead to

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tion: Constituting Identity, Security, and Community after the Bali Bombing,” *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), p. 66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809348712>.

29. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, pp. 17, 22, 69–71; and Neil J. Smelser, “Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma,” in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, p. 270.

30. Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 1986), p. 1161, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1960861>.

31. John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 31–52; and Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 4–40.

32. See, for example, Smelser, “Epilogue: September 11, 2001.”

33. Social psychologists and others call this “distant survivor syndrome.” See Robert Jay Lifton, “Americans as Survivors,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 352, No. 22 (2005), p. 2263, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp058048>.

stages two and three of trauma. Many of society's "wise figures" will engage in storytelling in stage two. External trauma privileges stories from agents who I call "promoters," those who validate public fears of existential danger and the need to defend liberal order abroad.<sup>34</sup> If rival gains come via direct attack, promoter stories immediately prevail and the liberal narrative strengthens quickly.<sup>35</sup> If attacks are indirect, the slower growth of severity means that promoter stories gain acceptance more slowly, too. In stage three, repeated rival attacks/gains validate the promoter story, giving it collective strength. Finally, the frequency of events sustains narrative strength and salience over time. In a path-dependent way, the liberal narrative remains robust if an ideological rival regularly continues (i.e., at least every two or three years) to make gains, especially if it either directly or indirectly attacks other ideologically kindred (in this case, liberal or liberalizing) states.<sup>36</sup> In essence, frequent and severe challenges abroad perpetually re-traumatize the nation, giving a robust liberal narrative ongoing strength and vitality.<sup>37</sup>

The dominant variant of the liberal narrative during the Cold War—the anti-communist narrative—offers a good example of the theory. In the 1940s, the U.S. public was traumatized by a cascade of Soviet ideological gains: communist advances in East-Central Europe, atomic bomb tests, an alliance with newly communist China, and support of the Korean War. This development shut out moderate voices, such as progressive Vice President Henry A. Wallace, and allowed promoters to establish a robust liberal narrative around stopping communism. For much of the forty years that followed, frequent demonstrations of communist-bloc strength (i.e., Sputnik, gains in Africa and Asia, the Cuban Revolution, and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) re-traumatized the United States, keeping the anti-communist narrative robust.<sup>38</sup>

There are two potential pathways by which severity and frequency can weaken the liberal narrative. First, the narrative will weaken most profoundly and substantially when an ideological rival experiences a debilitating defeat

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34. Threat involves geopolitics plus identity, similar to what is found in Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics*; Owen, *The Clash of Ideas*; and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 1–50.

35. Liberal narratives may focus on protection against counter-ideologies or promotion of liberal order, similar to Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics*.

36. Indirect attacks here gain immediate salience because of an already robust narrative, such as in Hutchison, "Trauma and the Politics of Emotion," pp. 73–80.

37. Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (2000), pp. 251–267, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011>.

38. Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 109–114.

or changes its ideology altogether. These kinds of positive events generate what Emile Durkheim calls “success anomie,” or a collective sense of lost purpose for the nation that makes the old narrative appear antiquated as a guide for policy.<sup>39</sup> Positive events profoundly weaken a temporal variant of the liberal narrative for years to follow—this becomes permanent if a rival fails to rebuild.

Second, narrative weakening could also occur when either trauma-generating strategic gains by an ideological rival cease for at least four years, or when a rival takes accommodating steps to reduce tension. This absence of negative events can also produce success anomie. When either scenario happens, the frequency and severity of traumatic events fall below the threshold necessary to sustain a robust liberal narrative. In these conditions, especially when marked by the positive event of a rival’s debilitating defeat, a political opportunity space emerges for certain agents who I call “moderators” to engage in storytelling about reduced ideological danger and restraint abroad. U.S. presidents sometimes become moderators, but as Obama found out the hard way, their success as storytellers depends on the event-driven context. That is, they must tell the right story at the right time.<sup>40</sup> The liberal narrative weakens under these conditions of rival decline or absence of negative events; retrenchment settles in as the new lodestar for the polity. For example, the liberalization and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 initiated a major re-narration by moderators. As a result, the anti-communist narrative disappeared from discussions of U.S. foreign policy.

#### NARRATIVE DISCOURSES AND WAR

Narratives shape policy outcomes—such as decisions to sustain or end wars—by raising audience costs. Standard accounts demonstrate that audience costs emerge when heads of state bind themselves by making a public commitment to action abroad.<sup>41</sup> Audience costs from strategic narratives form in a different way, however, notably through social construction.<sup>42</sup> At key decision points, agents (promoters or moderators) use strategic narratives to build discourses

39. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), p. 246.

40. Presidents can be important promoters, too, in the right event-driven conditions. For example, see Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 83–87.

41. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” p. 583.

42. On the narrowness of the executive-commitment framework, see Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (2011), pp. 437–456, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541100027X>.

for or against war. These discourses generate different domestic political cost-benefit scenarios: high audience costs of action, or high audience costs of inaction.<sup>43</sup> While not required for these kinds of discourses to form, appeals by leaders with robust narratives as a justification for policy may help fuel these narrative-driven discourses and elevate audience costs. Leader pledges (i.e., the conventional audience-cost argument) can matter, then, but only if they are linked to prevailing narratives. Regardless of their contributions to the process, democratic leaders worry about future elections or their broader policy agendas (i.e., the potential political consequences of elevated audience costs) when facing robust, narrative-based discourses. Consequently, leaders usually bring policy in line with the narrative discourses that agents build around them.

For starters, I assume that at any major policy decision point, both promoters and moderators will be present to advocate their different positions. Liberal war continuation (and expansion) is most likely when a strong liberal narrative develops at key decision points in a conflict. Here, a robust liberal narrative (meaning, again, an elevated national passion to protect liberal order abroad) augments promoter arguments. This gives promoters a special hearing with the public and in policy debates generally.<sup>44</sup> Promoters know this and use the liberal narrative to create (or policymakers fear they will create) broad public movements, which raises audience costs of inaction. In wartime, military leaders are often also promoters, and strategic narratives tip the civil-military balance in their favor. Civilian leaders who do not support continuing or expanding military action fear losing future elections or policy goals, and thus some bring their policies in line with promoters' arguments. Others get "pushed to act" against their better judgment to continue or expand liberal wars.

Sometimes, these reluctant leaders ironically help create the strong liberal discourses that later push them along. In the 1960 presidential campaign, President John F. Kennedy intentionally took a tough position against Fidel Castro's communist regime in Cuba to enhance his anti-communist credentials with voters. This stance helped Kennedy win the White House, but it also

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43. On discourses, see Stephen Ellingson, "Understanding the Dialectic of Discourse and Collective Action: Public Debate and Rioting in Antebellum Cincinnati," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (1995), p. 107, <https://doi.org/10.1086/230700>.

44. On ideas augmenting agents, see Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rhetoric of Appeasement: Hitler's Legitimation and British Foreign Policy, 1938–39," *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2015), pp. 95–130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1001216>.

boxed him in once in office. As promoters in Congress built a robust discourse around anti-communism for a tough policy in 1961, the political costs of looking weak on communism proved too high for Kennedy to pursue his preferred course of normalizing relations with Castro's regime. The 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion followed.<sup>45</sup>

Liberal wars end as liberal discourse weakens. Because of a national sense of lost purpose, moderator appeals (which often come from civilians in wartime) resonate more in policy debates as the liberal narrative weakens. Promoter arguments tend to appear odd, by contrast, maybe even extreme. Consequently, promoters often go quiet, especially in public.<sup>46</sup> In this scenario, leaders face lower audience costs of inaction, and they may in fact perceive higher audience costs of action given the absence of a national passion for war. In this latter scenario, leaders worry about the domestic political dangers of carrying on or expanding the war. As a result, a weak liberal discourse allows leaders who prefer ending a liberal war to do so, and it pushes those leaders who prefer to continue fighting to instead phase down or end military action. During the 1990s, moderators inside President Bill Clinton's administration repeatedly pointed to flagging public support for things like democracy building and humanitarian intervention (i.e., a weak liberal discourse).<sup>47</sup> This discourse constrained military options for Clinton, especially in the Balkans, throughout his administration.<sup>48</sup>

## Methods

I combine congruence and comparative case study methods to test the strategic-narrative argument in decisions for troop increases in Afghanistan by Obama (2009) and Trump (2017) against Biden's decision to withdraw (2021).<sup>49</sup> For space reasons and because Biden made the final decision, I devote less attention to Trump's 2020 pledge to withdraw. The cases are good for compari-

45. Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011), p. 92. The narrative made Kennedy's campaign pledge salient—no narrative discourses, no audience costs.

46. For more on these choices, see Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 35–36.

47. Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), pp. 386–390, 401–405, 422–425.

48. Sarah E. Kreps, "The 1994 Haiti Intervention: A Unilateral Operation in Multilateral Clothes," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2007), pp. 449–474, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390701343441>.

49. Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), pp. 227–301.

son, holding several background factors constant, such as war (Afghanistan) and period (post-9/11). The Obama-Biden cases are especially good for comparison because they share a common policy approach and party affiliation, but they lead to different outcomes. Outcome variation avoids sampling on the dependent variable.

Tautology is a pitfall for any ideational argument. To avoid this, I use a method of symbolic structuring of discourse to assess narrative strength and its component parts (i.e., severity and frequency) at time t-1, meaning independent of and prior to the decision-making process.<sup>50</sup> Narrative strength is measured in each case study using content analysis of newspaper editorials and the *Congressional Record* (see the online appendix), along with secondary sources and public opinion polls. Editorials reflect the collective national discussion across the country around specific events at specific points in time. Consequently, they are a well-established tool for measuring collective ideas, like narratives. Scholars find that patterns in the *Congressional Record* do the same—in a mutually constitutive way, authoritative actors both reflect and help reinforce prevailing narrative trends in any given period.<sup>51</sup>

For the Afghan cases, I first scanned the historical record for geostrategic gains that were likely to reach the threshold of severity required to spark trauma and the initial narrative-making process. Most notably, examples include any attacks by an illiberal actor on the United States or other liberal states that caused civilian casualties or threatened to spread illiberalism. Second, and most importantly for the strategic-narrative argument in this article, I then scanned the historical record beyond the initial trauma for any similar follow-on severe attacks. If the strategic-narrative argument is correct, the above measures should demonstrate that a direct attack on the United States, or a series of indirect attacks on strategic partners (i.e., severity), open(s) space for promoters and generates a new liberal narrative centered on existential danger, blame, and a lesson to get active abroad against a specific foe. Likewise, these measures should also show that a follow-on attack (i.e., frequency) reinforces and sustains the narrative. Specifically, patterns of discourse in congressional and editorial commentary will typically show extensive references

50. Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 22.

51. For example, see Jeffrey W. Legro, "Whence American Internationalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2000), p. 256, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551172>; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, pp. 195–197; and Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 48–52. Unless otherwise noted, editorial (upwards of sixty different newspapers nationwide) and *Congressional Record* surveys span ten days after major events. See the online appendix.

to existential danger and the need to get active, and they will link present severe events to those in the past, especially at the narrative founding. Secondary sources and polls will show the same pattern.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, if severity and frequency are low in a given period—owing to the defeat of an ideological rival (i.e., positive event) or scarcity of direct/indirect attacks (i.e., absence of negative events) by a rival for at least two or three years—there should be less discussion in editorials and the *Congressional Record* about an ideological foe compared with periods marked by narrative robustness. Likewise, talk of existential danger, blame, and the lesson to protect liberal order abroad should be substantially less than in periods of a robust liberal narrative. Polls and scholarly or pundit assessments in secondary sources will validate this outcome.

Finally, using a singular type of congruence test, I explore narrative discourses and their impact (if any) on decisions to continue, expand, or end war. If the strategic-narrative argument is correct, assessments by pundits, memoirs, and the like should show how narrative-based discourses affected policy decisions in predicted ways. When the liberal discourse is robust, various actors (especially leaders) should talk about the domestic pressure to continue military action or the domestic costs of withdrawal. But when the discourse is weak, they should talk about domestic costs to maintain military action or political space to retrench from conflicts abroad.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Narrative Emerges and Settles In*

The September 11 terrorist attacks dramatically reversed the weak liberal narrative environment of the early post-Cold War period.<sup>54</sup> “This week’s frontal assault on America is a collective trauma unlike any other in any of our lifetimes,” observed the *San Francisco Chronicle*.<sup>55</sup> “A new narrative literally fell from the sky on September 11” and “became embedded in the popular imagination,” noted a pair of scholars.<sup>56</sup> Almost everyone became a promoter. As

52. Because the point at which public opinion polls capture collective ideas such as narratives is uncertain, I follow the lead of other ideational scholars and use polls in tandem with established measures of collective ideas (e.g., editorials). See Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, p. 22; Legro, “Whence American Internationalism,” p. 280; Goddard, “The Rhetoric of Appeasement,” pp. 121, 125; and Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, pp. 135–136.

53. Beach and Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods*, pp. 286–287.

54. Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, pp. 167–198.

55. “Time Out to Deal with Trauma,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 13, 2001.

56. Amy Zalman and Jonathan Clarke, “The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2009), p. 101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2009.00201.x>.

anticipated when external trauma arises from a direct attack, the story immediately saturated the public discourse—print media, television, members of Congress, and eventually in statements by President George W. Bush. The story included all standard parts of a national security narrative: detailing events existentially, assigning blame, and setting a way forward to repair (i.e., lesson). Members of Congress repeatedly framed events in existential terms, as an attack on “our laws, our cherished beliefs.”<sup>57</sup> “This is war,” declared House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-MO), just after the attack.<sup>58</sup> Newspapers across the country echoed the same themes, as did polls in late September: 58 percent of Americans wanted “a long-term war”; 73 percent supported ground troops to “combat international terrorism.”<sup>59</sup>

In the years that followed, the frequency of severe attacks remained high and reinforced the liberal narrative. Targets included, to name a few, Kuwait (2002), Bali (2002, 2005), Mombasa (2002), Riyadh (2003), Casablanca (2003), Istanbul (2003), Madrid (2004), London (2005), Algiers (2007), and countless bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan starting in 2004.<sup>60</sup> These events (especially against liberal or liberalizing allies in Europe and Iraq) sparked fervent national discussions in the United States.

Most specifically, the salience of promoter narratives about existential danger, parallels to 9/11, and the lesson to fight terrorism increased dramatically. Bush framed the 2005 London terrorist attack as an assault on “human liberty.”<sup>61</sup> Of Madrid, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that the bombing should “redouble everyone’s efforts” to go after terrorists.<sup>62</sup> As anticipated by trauma theory, every congressional statement in the two weeks after the Madrid and London attacks described them in existential terms, which both reflected and revalidated the robust liberal narrative. “Americans were shocked and dismayed . . . when terror struck the capital of the United

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57. Congresswoman Lee (D-CA), speaking on H.J. Res 64, 107th Cong., 1st sess., 2001, Vol. 147, pt. 12, p. 16774.

58. Representative Gephardt (D-MO), speaking on H.J. Res. 64, 107th Cong., 1st sess., 2001, Vol. 147, pt. 12, p. 16763.

59. “Harris Interactive Survey #07: Terrorism,” Harris Interactive, September 27–28, 2001, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu>; and “Wirthlin Worldwide Poll: September 2001,” Wirthlin Worldwide, September 21–26, 2001, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu>.

60. “Timeline—Major Attacks by al Qaeda,” Reuters, May 2, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-56711920110502>. Several bombs targeted commuters on the London transit system, killing more than 50 and injuring approximately 700. The Madrid bombings occurred on four commuter trains, killing nearly 200 and injuring approximately 1,800.

61. “Terrorists Win If We Give into Fear,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 8, 2005.

62. “Editorial,” *Journal and Courant* [Indiana], March 16, 2004.



Kingdom, the cradle of Western liberty," one said of London.<sup>63</sup> "The free nations of the world will . . . ensure that those who hate freedom and liberty will not succeed," said another of Madrid.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, no one framed these as isolated, disconnected events, but instead linked them together as "reminders" and, with that, extensions of September 11 and the anti-terrorism narrative. Many talked of how Americans did and should look "through the prism" of September 11 to make sense of Bali, Madrid, London, Istanbul, and the like. "No American will ever forget the infamous day of 9/11," a member of Congress said of Madrid.<sup>65</sup> Finally, promoters stressed that these events supported the lesson to press on in the fight against terrorism. It was like a drumbeat from political leaders: "stand firm against terrorism"; "renew our determination to eradicate terrorism"; "dismantle the al Qaeda network"; "remain defiant in the face of terrorism."<sup>66</sup>

Like the days after 9/11, promoter appeals resonated and echoed nationally, pointing to the continued strength and vitality of the anti-terrorism narrative into the late 2000s. This was evident in two ways. First, it showed up in newspapers across the country, from big cities to small towns. Content analysis of seventy-two editorials in the ten days after the Madrid bombings found that 54 percent of the papers described the attacks in existential terms related to democracy, liberty, freedom, or civilization; 64 percent drew parallels between the bombing and other recent terrorist attacks, especially 9/11; and 70 percent referenced the central lesson of the narrative to actively stamp out terrorism abroad. The same was the case with editorials following the London bombings: 63 percent were existential; 71 percent were connected to 9/11 or other terrorist attacks; and 73 percent referenced the lesson to remain or become more active abroad to fight terrorism.<sup>67</sup>

Take a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, for instance, about Madrid. "So much

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63. Congressman Hyde (R-IL), 109th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 151 (July 13, 2005), p. H5766.

64. Congressman Linder (R-GA), 97th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 150 (March 11, 2004), p. E354.

65. Congresswoman Jackson Lee (D-TX), 97th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 150 (March 16, 2004), p. H1906.

66. Congressman Gingrey (R-GA), Congressman Lantos (D-CA), and Congressman Royce (R-CA), 109th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 151 (July 13, 2005), pp. H5746 and H5766; and Senator McConnell (R-KY), 109th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 151 (July 11, 2005), p. S7946.

67. ProQuest search, "Madrid AND bomb\*," March 11–21, 2004, N=72, 37 newspapers; and ProQuest search, "London AND bomb\*," July 7–17, 2005, N=100, 53 newspapers. See the online appendix.

for the illusion that the global war on terror isn't really a war," noted the editors, "That complacent notion which has been infiltrating its way into the American public mind, blew up along with 10 bombs on trains carrying Spanish commuters yesterday." The editors then listed eleven other attacks—including September 11—to draw attention to the existential danger that "terrorism remains the single largest threat to Western freedom and security."<sup>68</sup> Headlines around the Madrid, London, and Bali bombings were similar: "This Week, 'Madrid Became Manhattan'"; "Ground Zero, Madrid"; "Terror in London: A Reminder to the World that War of 9/11 Is Not Over."<sup>69</sup> A total of 56 percent of Americans agreed that the London attacks showed that "it is necessary to fight the war against the terrorists in Iraq and everywhere else."<sup>70</sup>

A second indicator of narrative strength was the extent to which both Democrats and Republicans used the narrative as a political battering ram by the late 2000s. The Bush White House had long painted political opponents as weak on terrorism to win votes.<sup>71</sup> By 2006, with al-Qaeda gaining new ground in Iraq (where the United States was deeply invested in trying to build a liberal democratic government), Republicans doubled down on this message, saying that Democratic proposals for withdrawal from Iraq would aid terrorists. "If we were to follow the proposals of Democratic leaders," said one Republican (GOP) House member in a 2007 debate on a resolution opposing the Iraq troop surge, "anarchy in Iraq would give al Qaeda and other extremists a haven to train and plot attacks."<sup>72</sup> Thirty-nine other Republicans (73 percent of GOP speakers) echoed the same that day. Many senior Democrats also used the anti-terrorism narrative as a counterpunch. "Fighting terrorism, fighting extremism . . . is weakened by our being in Iraq," said Representative Barney Frank (D-MA); "it has emboldened radicals everywhere."<sup>73</sup> Others noted simi-

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68. "Spain's 3/11: A Horrifying Reminder that the War on Terror Is Not Over," *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2004.

69. "This Week, 'Madrid Became Manhattan,'" *San Antonio Express*, March 13, 2004; "Ground Zero, Madrid," *New York Times*, March 12, 2004; and "Terror in London: A Reminder to the World that War of 9/11 Is Not Over," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 8, 2005.

70. "Fox News Poll: July 2005," *Fox News*, July 13–15, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu>.

71. Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Anchor, 2013), pp. 428–430.

72. Congressman Westmoreland (R-GA), speaking on H. Con. Res. 63, 111th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 153 (February 16, 2007), p. H1797.

73. Congressman Frank (D-MA), H. Con. Res. 63, 111th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 153 (February 16, 2007), pp. H1797–1798.

larly how Bush “distracted us from the real war on terror” and “weakened our fight against al Qaeda.”<sup>74</sup>

Afghanistan played a big part in these Democratic counterpunches around terrorism, especially after a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate showed that the Taliban/al-Qaeda had made significant gains there. Democratic calls to “refocus” the war on terrorism invariably meant moving attention to Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup> Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama (D-IL) led the way.<sup>76</sup> “We must get off the wrong battlefield,” Obama charged in an August 2007 speech, before committing to send two additional divisions to Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup> The speech was intentional, meant to counter charges from Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) in a July presidential primary debate that Obama was weak on foreign policy. Cognizant of how Bush successfully painted rival presidential candidate John Kerry as “weak” on terrorism in 2004, political strategist David Axelrod hatched the idea of the August speech.<sup>78</sup> “Outflanking Bush-Cheney with a serious, aggressive, intelligent campaign against Islamist terror?” said a pair of observers, “It’s what the country wants. And it seems to be what Obama is offering.”<sup>79</sup>

Overall, Obama’s August 2007 move reflected the strength of the liberal narrative around terrorism in the late 2000s. It also fueled a narrative-based discourse that constrained Obama throughout his presidency.

#### OBAMA’S FIRST TROOP SURGE

When President Obama took office in 2009, a request for additional troops for Afghanistan was on his desk.<sup>80</sup> Obama initially hesitated. “I have campaigned on providing Afghanistan more troops,” he said in a January 23 National Security Council (NSC) meeting, “but I haven’t made the decision yet.” Supported by Vice President Joe Biden and other civilian moderators in the White House, Obama expressed doubts about escalation, blocked a move by military

74. Congressman Waxman (D-CA) and Congresswoman Clarke (D-NY), H. Con. Res. 63, 111th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 153 (February 16, 2007), pp. H1810, H1812.

75. Congressman Berra (D-CA), H. Con. Res. 63, 111th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 153 (February 16, 2007), p. H1797.

76. Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 68; and Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), pp. 48, 83–89. Terrorism connected with voters, Obama said.

77. Dan Balz, “Obama Says He Would Take Fight to Pakistan,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2007.

78. Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random, 2018), pp. 8, 12–15.

79. Tim O’Brien and S. Writer, “The Blog House,” *Star Tribune* [Minneapolis], August 4, 2007.

80. Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), p. 70.

leaders to add troops without his approval, and commissioned former NSC staffer Bruce Riedel to conduct a review of Afghan policy, after which Obama would decide on troops.<sup>81</sup>

Moderators failed, however. Animated by the cascade of narrative-validating terror attacks, a surging liberal discourse prevented Obama from maintaining this wait and see approach, pushing him to approve 17,000 more troops for Afghanistan in mid-February 2009, well before the completed review. Combined with the president's campaign pledges, public support for the troop request by promoters—like Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—ignited an expansive national discussion for more action. In editorials, 70 percent supported more troops, 85 percent discussed combating terrorism (i.e., the narrative's lesson), and 40 percent mentioned Obama's campaign pledges.<sup>82</sup> The *Washington Post* criticized Obama for waffling on his campaign promises: "The war on terrorism did not end on January 20 [Obama's Inauguration Day]."<sup>83</sup> Polls showed that 70 percent of respondents expected Afghanistan to fall under "the control of terrorists" if the United States left; 63 percent favored more troops.<sup>84</sup> Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes bemoaned the "political drama" and the fact that "the media started calling Afghanistan 'Obama's War.'"<sup>85</sup> The White House saw costs of inaction rising.

Promoters inside the administration elevated these costs too. In the January 23 NSC meeting, General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. Central Command, said that failure was coming in Afghanistan and that al-Qaeda would gain ground: "we cannot achieve our objective without more troops." Mullen echoed the same.<sup>86</sup> Obama knew the political risks. Just ten days prior, Senator Graham had warned Obama that Republicans would use failure in Afghanistan in the 2010 midterms. During a February 13 meeting, advisers gave Obama two options: wait on Riedel's report or add 17,000 troops. Promoters (including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) harped

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–89.

82. ProQuest search, "Afghanistan," January 20–February 22, 2009, N=20, 20 newspapers.

83. "The Afghan Challenge," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2009.

84. Lymari Morales, "Americans See Afghanistan as Still Worth Fighting," *Gallup*, February 19, 2009, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/115270/Americans-Afghanistan-War-Worth-Fighting.aspx>; and "Barack Obama and Congress/Economy/War on Terrorism," *CNN*, February 18–19, 2009, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu>.

85. Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, p. 62.

86. Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, p. 80.

on narrative themes: a “bloodbath” for al-Qaeda without more troops.<sup>87</sup> The domestic fallout of that happening was simply too high. “For practical and *political* purposes there really was no choice [*italics added*],” observed Bob Woodward.<sup>88</sup> Four days later, Obama publicly justified more troops as being vital to counterterrorism; 63 percent of the electorate approved.<sup>89</sup> Like Woodward, the *New York Times* concluded that Obama “had no choice” given what he said “during the campaign.” In short, Obama’s opportunistic use of the anti-terrorism narrative during the 2008 presidential campaign fueled a robust liberal discourse and high audience costs of inaction that forced his hand in February 2009.<sup>90</sup>

#### OBAMA AND THE SECOND TROOP SURGE

In June 2009, National Security Advisor James Logan Jones Jr. told General Stanley McChrystal, the head of military operations in Afghanistan, that the president wanted to “reduce U.S. involvement” and shift to an aid-based strategy.<sup>91</sup> Eight weeks later, McChrystal requested an additional 40,000 troops as part of a report assessing the situation in Afghanistan. When Secretary of Defense Robert Gates informed the president, “the room exploded” in opposition.<sup>92</sup> Moderators in the White House warned Obama that he had pledged to end the Middle East wars.<sup>93</sup> “I shared Joe’s [Biden] skepticism,” Obama said as he pushed back against more troops. There “are no good options,” he noted in a September 12 NSC meeting.<sup>94</sup>

In the end, moderators lost again. As in February, the president capitulated to the anti-terrorism narrative pressure. In early September 2009, promoters generated a robust liberal discourse for more troops, arguing that failure risked another September 11. Frustrated by Obama’s hesitancy, military leaders—namely, Petraeus, Mullen, and McChrystal—played a critical role by

87. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–98; and Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage, 2015), pp. 337–340.

88. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 96.

89. Karen DeYoung, “Obama Ok’s Adding Troops in Afghanistan,” *Boston Globe*, February 18, 2009; and “Barack Obama and Congress/Economy/War on Terrorism,” *CNN*, February 18–19, 2009, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/>.

90. “Salvaging Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2009.

91. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 134–135.

92. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs*, pp. 349–350.

93. This pledge was not linked to the robust liberal narrative; hence, there were no audience costs and little policy salience.

94. Obama, *A Promised Land*, pp. 432–433; and Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 167–169.

going public to use the robust anti-terrorism narrative to their advantage (which augmented their position in policy debates, as the strategic-narrative argument expects). The move was calculated. In a late August meeting on handling White House resistance to more troops, Senator Graham (while on air force reserve duty in Afghanistan) told Petraeus and McChrystal that their messaging focused too much on the Taliban. "America is worried all about al Qaeda attacking," he counseled, "Americans understand that the Taliban are bad guys, but what drives the American psyche more than anything else is, are we about to let the country that attacked us once attack us twice?"<sup>95</sup> In short, Graham counseled the generals to use the anti-terrorism narrative to their political advantage.

The generals complied, now focusing their message on al-Qaeda, new attacks, and the potential for "failure" without more troops.<sup>96</sup> Petraeus warned publicly that the Afghan government would collapse without a fully resourced counterinsurgency.<sup>97</sup> On September 15 (just three days after Obama's "no good options" comment), Mullen told Congress that success in Afghanistan required more troops. A few days later, the *Washington Post* reported on a leaked copy of the McChrystal report in a front-page article titled "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure.'" The sixty-six-page report mentioned "failure" or "defeat" fourteen times.<sup>98</sup> Finally, McChrystal said publicly that he rarely spoke directly with Obama and that another September 11 would come without additional resolve.<sup>99</sup> Obama looked weak and out of touch.

As expected, these moves fueled a powerful liberal discourse across the country for more troops in Afghanistan. From mid-September to mid-October, 71 percent of statements on Capitol Hill about Afghanistan mentioned comments by the generals, and 88 percent of supporters of more force warned of another September 11: "Afghanistan is where the attacks of 9/11 originated" and "the sacrifices we make overseas now will prevent another 9/11-style attack here at home."<sup>100</sup> Promoters in Congress attacked Obama's hesitancy to

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95. Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, pp. 155–156.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

97. Michael Gerson, "In Afghanistan, No Choices but to Try," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2009.

98. Bob Woodward, "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure,'" *Washington Post*, September 21, 2009.

99. Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, pp. 158, 172, 180–181, 193.

100. Senator Lieberman (D-CT), 113th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 155 (September 6, 2009), p. S9471; and Congressman Stearns (R-FL), speaking on Cong. Res. 155, 113th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 155 (September 22, 2009), p. H9742.

uphold his March pledge to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda” following Riedel’s review.<sup>101</sup> “Soft-peddling . . . in Afghanistan,” said one; Obama’s “latest verbal wavering aided terrorists,” said another.<sup>102</sup>

Editorials showed similar trends. In the two months prior to Obama’s decision to send troops, 72 percent mentioned the generals, while nearly 80 percent commented on a liberal narrative of either avoiding another September 11 or fighting against terrorism in Afghanistan. “Afghanistan served as al-Qaeda’s base,” noted one paper.<sup>103</sup> Fifty-eight percent endorsed more troops.<sup>104</sup> Many critiqued Obama for hesitating and accused him of “second thoughts,” “full retreat,” “Afghan rethink,” “blinking,” “appeasement,” and labeled him a “coward.”<sup>105</sup> Opinion polls reflected these narrative trends. In September and October 2009, 58 percent of editorials considered fighting in Afghanistan to be “necessary to protect Americans from having to fight terrorists on U.S. soil,” and 62 percent trusted the generals more than Obama. Obama’s approval on Afghanistan fell to 36 percent, down from 63 percent in April.<sup>106</sup>

For Obama, the liberal discourse elevated the costs of inaction, which drove his decision to increase troops. First, this discourse reinforced what he already knew: Politically, he could not afford to “lose” Afghanistan and risk another September 11. Promoters inside the government hammered this theme. “We were surprised once on 9/11,” Riedel told Obama, following his review (which endorsed more troops). “It’s going to be pretty hard to explain what happened to the American people if we’re surprised again,” he added.<sup>107</sup> Following a

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101. “President Obama’s Remarks on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2009.

102. Congressman Johnson (D-TX), speaking on Cong. Res. 155, 113th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 155 (September 23, 2009), p. H9810; and Senator Bond, 113th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 155 (September 24, 2009), p. S9766.

103. “Let Mission Dictate,” *Orlando Sentinel*, October 8, 2009.

104. Only 19 percent opposed additional troops. ProQuest search, “Afghanistan,” August 1–October 15, 2009, N=95, 55 newspapers.

105. “Wavering on Afghanistan?” *Washington Post*, September 22, 2009; “Obama and the General,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2009; “Not Just ‘More Troops,’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 7, 2009; and “Our View: Peace Laureate Must Rethink War,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, October 10, 2009.

106. “Fox News Opinion Dynamics,” *Fox News*, September 15–16, 2009, [https://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/092109\\_poll1.pdf](https://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/092109_poll1.pdf); “NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll,” *NBC/Wall Street Journal*, October 2–4, 2009, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu>; “A Year Out, Widespread Anti-Incumbent Sentiment,” Pew Research Center, November 11, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2009/11/11/a-year-out-widespread-anti-incumbent-sentiment/>; “4/27: Majority Approves of Obama’s Job Performance,” *Marist Poll*, April 27, 2009, <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/427-majority-approves-of-obamas-job-performance/>; and Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 248.

107. Cited in Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 105–106.

May briefing on al-Qaeda, Obama noted that even minor attacks would have “an extraordinarily traumatizing effect on the homeland.”<sup>108</sup>

Costs of inaction were also evident in a September 12 NSC meeting, which was the first such meeting about McChrystal’s report. The political implications of McChrystal’s “failure” warning shaped the debate. Despite his hesitancy, Obama admitted that he could not “reject McChrystal’s plan out of hand” because the “status quo was untenable” and that more time was needed to “root out al-Qaeda and its leadership.”<sup>109</sup> When Biden warned that Obama would politically own the war, the president snapped, “I already own it.” Thinking of his reelection timetable, Obama then asked if progress was possible within three years.<sup>110</sup> An aide noted that the broader narrative discourse—especially charges of waffling on terrorism—amplified political concerns like Riedel’s warning that Obama alone would “take the blame for any bad outcomes.”<sup>111</sup> “Why is the whole thing framed around whether I have any balls?” Obama asked aides.<sup>112</sup> The robust liberal discourse was on his mind.

The discourse-generated costs of inaction also drastically narrowed Obama’s options. Obama was keenly aware of the importance of the public discourse, saying that he wanted the decision to be made behind closed doors, away from “congressional politics and media grousing,” so that he could consider all options. He then became enraged at military leaders’ public comments. Why? Because the warnings of failure and another September 11 reinforced the anti-terrorism narrative—what Obama referred to as the national “impulse after 9/11 to do whatever it took to stop terrorists”—in ways that “boxed him in.”<sup>113</sup> He talked about this repeatedly at the time and later admitted to feeling “jammed.” Obama told aides in early October, “They’re about to ask for a game-changing number and they’re going to the public and leaking it to trap us.”<sup>114</sup> Obama was stuck. Fearful of narrative-based pushback, he could not demote or fire the generals. In fact, just the opposite. Concerned about the political costs of doing otherwise, Obama included Petraeus in all NSC meetings on Afghanistan from late September onward.<sup>115</sup>

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108. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 123.

109. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–163; and Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 433.

110. Cited in Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 161–168.

111. Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, pp. 66–67.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

113. Obama, *A Promised Land*, pp. 433, 436.

114. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 195. See also Gates, *Duty: Memoirs*, p. 378; and Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” p. 75.

115. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 186.



Moderators knew that the liberal discourse reduced their traction. “It’s going to be the lead story on the evening news . . . [and] double black headlines above the fold on every single newspaper,” said Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel about Mullen’s September 15 congressional testimony. Emanuel also complained constantly to Gates about Obama feeling boxed in. Gates agreed, calling McChrystal’s leaked report “a political bombshell” that narrowed Obama’s options.<sup>116</sup> In the end, efforts by the White House to counter the liberal discourse failed. Rhodes confessed that amid the wave of “public pressure” generated by the military promoters, “it felt as though I had little ability to control anything other than the inevitable speech that Obama would give” on increasing U.S. troops in Afghanistan.<sup>117</sup>

In October, Obama agreed to add troops. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Leon Panetta set the course of a debate on October 9. A seasoned politician, Panetta noted the “political reality” created by the robust liberal narrative: “We can’t leave, and we can’t accept the status quo.”<sup>118</sup> He proposed increasing troops narrowly targeted at al-Qaeda, not nation-building. Gates agreed, saying that “the public and the politicians could easily understand” that mission, meaning that it fit well with the robust anti-terrorism narrative.<sup>119</sup> Obama capitulated.<sup>120</sup> His second decision to expand the U.S. war in Afghanistan was set.<sup>121</sup>

### *The Narrative Peaks*

The 2011 killing of al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, was viewed across the United States as a major victory in the fight against terrorism (i.e., a positive event in the trauma framework). Combined with the quelling of terrorist activity in Iraq from the so-called Sunni Awakening (i.e., decreased negative events), the frequency and severity of trauma-generating events declined into the early 2010s. As expected by the strategic-narrative argument, the anti-terrorism narrative weakened, especially around Iraq. Counter to the interests of military leaders, President Obama found political space at home to sum-

116. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs*, pp. 368–369.

117. Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, pp. 73–75.

118. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 247; and Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin, 2015), pp. 253–255.

119. Cited in Gates, *Duty: Memoirs*, p. 375.

120. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, p. 224.

121. *Ibid.*, pp. 224–420.

marily withdraw all forces from Iraq (a decision that 71 percent of Americans agreed with) and worked to re-narrate the terror challenge as nonexistent, something to which Americans had overreacted.<sup>122</sup>

This initiative to change the narrative was largely ineffective, though, especially from mid-2014 onward when the swift rise of the Islamic State re-traumatized the United States. Mirroring the first decade of the 2000s, the liberal narrative again surged. The trauma began in June when ISIS forces seized Mosul (Iraq's second largest city) and Tikrit, declared a caliphate across Syria and Iraq, and later beheaded two U.S. journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff. Obama acknowledged the need to respond but also worked to calm the nation.<sup>123</sup>

Consequently, other leading figures (mostly Republicans) began to refer back to the prevailing anti-terrorism story that proved the right fit for the event-driven context of external trauma. "The next 9/11 is in the making as I speak," said Senator Graham in June.<sup>124</sup> More than half of congressional floor statements described ISIS in existential terms.<sup>125</sup> Many Democrats joined the chorus. "ISIS violates everything we believe in," noted Representative James Moran (D-VA), "They are opposed to democratic governance and, certainly, to an inclusive society."<sup>126</sup> Promoters in Congress nested the 2014 events within the larger story. More than half referenced September 11 and other attacks such as those in London and Madrid. The narrative's lesson was strong too; 76 percent of congressional speakers discussed the need to confront/destroy ISIS. "We need to do everything we can together to ensure that ISIS will be stopped," said Senator Chris Coons (D-DE).<sup>127</sup> Blame was also evident. More than half of all congressional statements (and approximately 80 percent of GOP statements) criticized both the Iraq troop withdrawal as well as Obama calling ISIS the "jayvee [junior varsity] team" of terrorism and ad-

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122. "Gingrich Is New Fave, Voters Approve of Iraq Withdrawal, President Beats All Comers," *PublicMind Poll*, Fairleigh Dickinson University, December 7, 2011, <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2011/newfave/>; and Krebs, "Pity the President," p. 37.

123. Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," statement on the state floor in Washington, D.C., September 10, 2014, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/Statement-president-isil-1>; and Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," p. 75.

124. Senator Graham (R-SC), 115th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 160 (June 12, 2014), p. S3630.

125. ProQuest search, "Islamic State," "ISIS," "ISIL," June 11–22, 2014 (rise of ISIS) and September 1–October 1, 2014 (journalist beheadings), N=199.

126. Congressman Moran (D-VA), 115th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 160 (September 10, 2014), p. H7550.

127. Senator Coons (D-DE), 115th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 160 (September 10, 2014), p. S5534.

mitting that he had no strategy to counter ISIS. “President Obama is going back to a pre-9/11 mentality,” one member said.<sup>128</sup> Some implored Obama to not repeat the mistake of withdrawing forces from Iraq with a withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>129</sup>

As expected, the story also showed up in other indicators. Editorials around the events from June to September reflected a robust anti-terrorism narrative.<sup>130</sup> For instance, 85 percent of editorials across approximately fifty newspapers rejected Obama’s cautious language, framing the threat in existential terms (e.g., “Islamic extremism,” “nihilistic ideology”). The events “horrified the civilized world,” said one, calling ISIS “beyond anything that we’ve seen.”<sup>131</sup> More than 50 percent of editorials drew parallels to terrorist attacks since September 11. Another 84 percent echoed the lesson to get active, nearly half of which discussed or endorsed criticisms of Obama’s policies. Polls also reflected this trend. Over 50 percent of respondents disapproved of Obama’s handling of terrorism and considered the 2011 Iraq drawdown to be a mistake.<sup>132</sup>

In the two years that followed the ISIS rise, the frequency of ISIS-inspired attacks—Sydney, Paris, Tripoli, Tunis, Yemen, Damascus, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, Bangladesh, Brussels, Kabul, and Cairo—reinforced the anti-terrorism narrative.<sup>133</sup> Take, for example, the November 2015 Paris attacks that killed 130 people. “Everyone back home had lost their minds,” said Obama, who was abroad at the time.<sup>134</sup> Among the promoters in Congress, nearly 90 percent framed the Paris attacks in existential terms and advocated continued or expanded vigor to combat terrorism. Ninety editorials from sixty different U.S. newspapers found that 88 percent framed Paris in existential terms (“the urgency of defeating this nihilism,” “attack . . . on freedom”).<sup>135</sup>

128. Senator Graham (R-SC), 115th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 160 (June 17, 2014), p. S3692.

129. *Ibid.* Many argued that Obama’s decision to completely withdraw troops from Iraq in 2011 opened the door for instability and the rise of ISIS, which put the United States and its allies at risk. They claimed that the lesson of Iraq, then, was to leave troops in Afghanistan.

130. ProQuest search, “Islamic State,” “ISIS,” “ISIL,” June 11–22, 2014, and August 20–September 12, 2014, N=91, 37 newspapers.

131. “The Time for Action Is Now,” *Daily Press* [Newport News], August 21, 2014; and “A Necessary Response to ISIS,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2014.

132. “June Poll—Bowe Bergdahl/Benghazi Attack/Healthcare Services for Veterans,” June 25–27, 2014, *Gallup*, iRoper, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/>.

133. Cameron Glenn et al., “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State” (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2019), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

134. Cited in Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” p. 82.

135. “The Price of Fear,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2015; and “Our View: West Needs Unity to Fight Terrorists,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, November 18, 2015.

Fifty percent linked Paris to 9/11 or other similar events, and 83 percent called for continued vigilance (i.e., the narrative's lesson).<sup>136</sup>

Finally, candidates for the White House in 2016 appealed to the narrative to woo voters. Trump promised more toughness: "Anyone who cannot condemn the . . . violence of Radical Islam lacks the moral clarity to serve as our president." Trump blamed Obama for ISIS, pledging a quick victory if elected and a commitment to never give up "hard-fought sacrifices and gains" in places like Iraq with "a sudden withdrawal."<sup>137</sup> He repeatedly linked his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, to Obama's policies. Clinton countered with her own narrative-based appeals, promising to use more force than Obama.<sup>138</sup> Overall, the jabbing back and forth testified again to narrative robustness. Much as the strategic narrative constrained Obama's options, it also affected Trump's policy on Afghanistan.

#### TRUMP AND THE 2017 TROOP INCREASE

As expected by the strategic-narrative argument, the mid-2010s surge in the anti-terrorism narrative shaped Obama's fall 2014 decision to recommit troops to Iraq and, fearing being blamed for "losing" Afghanistan, led him to abandon his plan for a full withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2016. A poll found that 61 percent of respondents supported the move to pause the drawdown.<sup>139</sup> These same narrative-based constraints affected Trump early in his presidency.

From the start, Trump wanted out of Afghanistan. He called the war "a total disaster," advocated withdrawal (on at least fifteen occasions during the campaign), and he exploded when the Pentagon requested more troops in 2017.<sup>140</sup>

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136. ProQuest search, "Paris" and "terror," November 14–24, 2015; and ProQuest search, "Brussels" and "terror," March 22–April 1, 2016, N=49. After Brussels, thirty newspapers demonstrated the same pattern: 69 percent existential, 73 percent post-9/11 narrative events, and 65 percent lesson.

137. Donald Trump, "Full Text: Donald Trump's Speech on Fighting Terrorism," *Politico*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-terrorism-speech-227025>.

138. "Comparing Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's Different Approaches to ISIS," *PBS News Hour*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/comparing-hillary-clinton-donald-trumps-approaches-isis>.

139. Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, pp. 296–313; Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 395–396; and "Fox News Poll: March 2015," *Fox News*, iRoper Center, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/>.

140. Anonymous, *A Warning* (New York: Twelve, 2019), pp. 46–47; Senator Paul (R-KY), speaking on H.R. 2810, 117th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 163 (September 12, 2017), p. S5199; Peter Bergen, *Trump and His Generals: The Cost of Chaos* (New York: Penguin, 2019), pp. 128, 132, 147–148, 150; and Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, pp. 115–125, 221–222.

In the end, however, Trump did the exact opposite of what he wanted. On August 18, he agreed to send 4,000 more troops to Afghanistan. Why? The politics of strategic narratives help answer this question.

Throughout 2017, promoters built a robust liberal discourse around Afghanistan. Republicans in Congress, in particular, talked about the dangers of terrorism from Afghanistan and encouraged a tougher stance than Obama's. Many praised Trump for reversing "the unwise and unsound policies by the Obama administration" with early 2017 moves that included use of high-yield bombs against ISIS in Afghanistan and air strikes to punish Syria for using chemical weapons, the latter in contrast to Obama's response in Syria.<sup>141</sup> The liberal discourse also showed up in a Senate debate over ending the Authorization for Use of Military Force resolution passed by Congress in 2001. Critics of the measure relied on the terrorism theme: "Terrorist organizations continue to . . . promote a radical ideology to recruit new fighters and plot violent attacks as part of their jihad against the United States of America and all that we stand for," said Senator John McCain (R-AZ). Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) echoed the same sentiment: "Sixteen years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, our enemies are not gone."<sup>142</sup> The measure failed by a 61–36 margin. Overall, nearly 60 percent of congressional statements on Afghanistan in this period focused on the lesson to fight terrorism.<sup>143</sup>

Other measures reveal the same strategic-narrative discourse. In summer 2017, 85 percent of newspapers supported more troops for anti-terrorism reasons.<sup>144</sup> More than half opposed a drawdown from Afghanistan or drew parallels to Obama's mistakes in Iraq. "He's right to broaden the U.S. role in Afghanistan," noted a *Chicago Tribune* editorial, "Obama's troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 left that country in a state of chaos, and the Islamic State rose from the ashes of al-Qaida in Iraq."<sup>145</sup> Polls in 2017 also captured the robust anti-terrorism discourse. While the war in Afghanistan was not generally popular, 76 percent of respondents agreed that "security here in the

141. Senator Barrasso (R-WY), 117th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 163 (April 27, 2017), p. S2572.

142. Senator McCain (R-AZ), speaking on H.R. 2810, 117th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 163 (September 13, 2017), p. S5263; and Senator McConnell (R-KY), speaking on H.R. 2810, 117th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, Vol. 163 (September 13, 2017), p. S5244.

143. ProQuest Congressional, "Afghanistan," January 20 and September 15, 2017, N=31.

144. ProQuest search, "Trump AND Afghanistan AND troop\*," June 1–August 31, 2017, N=41, 29 newspapers.

145. "Why Afghanistan Matters," *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 2017.

United States" depended upon Afghanistan, and 71 percent agreed that ISIS would strengthen if the United States were to withdraw. Consistent with the strategic-narrative argument, the public saw the war's value when it was tied to terrorism.<sup>146</sup>

Internally, promoters pressed narrative themes, elevating costs of inaction. Though not public per se, this messaging from current and former military leaders mirrored that of the Obama period. As Afghanistan deteriorated in the spring, National Security Advisor Herbert Raymond "H.R." McMaster and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Max Dunford repeatedly warned of another September 11. Promoters claimed that Obama's retreat was losing Afghanistan. They hammered themes such as the lost capacity to track al-Qaeda, a growing ISIS threat, and potential risks to the "civilized world" with another September 11. By early summer, McMaster proposed an additional 3,000–5,000 troops to carry out a new "counterterrorism-centric plan."<sup>147</sup>

As these events unfolded, promoters reminded Trump repeatedly of his narrative-based language on the campaign trail, intentionally playing on Trump's political concern to look tough. "We're losing big in Afghanistan," Trump said, reflecting worries of looking weak, "It's a disaster." Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis took advantage of this opportunity to challenge Trump's desire for withdrawal. "The quickest way out is to lose," Mattis said, before pressing the need for increased troops. "I'm tired of hearing that," Trump responded.<sup>148</sup>

Not surprisingly, given his ties to the military, Senator Graham was aware of the debate inside the administration. He met with Trump in May and used the robust anti-terrorism narrative to reiterate costs of inaction. "Do you want on your resume that you allowed Afghanistan to go back into darkness and the second 9/11 came from the very place the first 9/11 did?" Graham said, "Listen to your generals. General Obama was terrible . . . General Trump is going to be no better."<sup>149</sup> Graham knew that the pressure around terrorism and

146. Dana Blanton, "Fox News Poll: 27 Percent Favor Senate GOP Health Care Plan, as Vote Gets Delayed," *Fox News*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-27-percent-favor-senate-gop-health-care-plan-as-vote-gets-delayed>; Dana Blanton, "Fox News Poll: Candid? Yes. Presidential? Not So Much. Voters Describe Trump," *Fox News*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-candid-yes-presidential-not-so-much-voters-describe-trump>; and Dana Blanton, "Fox News Poll: Tax Reform Important to Voters, but Most Doubt It Will Happen," *Fox News*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-tax-reform-important-to-voters-but-most-doubt-it-will-happen>.

147. Bergen, *Trump and His Generals*, pp. 133–140; and Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, pp. 115–121.

148. Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, pp. 124–126.

149. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Obama could be effective. That spring, Trump took several steps to enhance his public image, such as striking al-Qaeda in Yemen, expanding action to “annihilate” (rather than just “contain,” in the words of Obama) ISIS, and launching “red line” strikes against Syrian chemical weapons that Obama refused to take.<sup>150</sup> “Obama, he’s . . . weak,” Trump told Graham after the Syrian strike, “He would’ve never done that.”<sup>151</sup>

The final decision to escalate came at a meeting with advisers on August 18, 2017, at Camp David. Costs of inaction for not falling in line with the anti-terrorism narrative played a determining role. Attorney General Jeff Sessions opened the meeting with an appeal for restraint. He proposed complete withdrawal. In a plan hatched by Sessions and former adviser Steve Bannon (a leading moderator), CIA Director Mike Pompeo detailed a strategy for increased covert operations in lieu of troops. In a move that frustrated his moderator cohorts, Pompeo ultimately and unexpectedly quashed the plan. Prior to the meeting, CIA officials told Pompeo that the covert-operations-only approach would likely fail and, more ominously, that he [Pompeo] would be held accountable.<sup>152</sup>

Once Pompeo relented, promoters (e.g., McMaster, Dunford, and White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly) began to discuss how to prevent al-Qaeda from reaching the homeland. “I’m tired of hearing that,” Trump responded, “I want to get out.” Mattis argued that to leave would result in a “vacuum for al Qaeda to create a terrorist sanctuary leading to 9/11.” Mattis then highlighted audience costs of inaction: “What happened in Iraq under Obama with the emergence of ISIS will happen under you.” In the days prior to Camp David, Graham issued a similar warning. “It becomes Iraq on steroids . . . The next 9/11 will come from where the first was and you own it,” Graham said, “The question is are you going to go down the Obama road, which is to end the war and put us all at risk . . . ?”<sup>153</sup> The domestic costs of looking weak on terrorism were apparent to Bannon, who told reporter Bob Woodward that the generals briefed Trump repeatedly on the dangers of another 9/11, so that “if the threat materialized, they would leak to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* that Trump had ignored the warnings.”<sup>154</sup> The political impli-

150. Bergen, *Trump and His Generals*, pp. 111–115, 118; and Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, pp. 51–73, 146–150. With each of these policy steps, Trump wanted to appear tougher than Obama.

151. Cited in Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, p. 151.

152. *Ibid.*, pp. 256–258; and Bergen, *Trump and His Generals*, p. 157. Steve Bannon left the White House in mid-August.

153. All cited in Woodward, *Fear: Trump and the White House*, pp. 255–256.

154. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

cations of that would be devastating for Trump, given elevated national concerns about terrorism and his campaign promises to be “tough.” The potential of a narrative-based public backlash hung over the entire debate.

Costs of inaction ultimately proved too much for Trump. “You’re telling me I have to do this, and I guess that’s fine,” Trump responded to Mattis on August 18, “but I still think you’re wrong.”<sup>155</sup> Afterward, Trump called Graham to inform him of his decision—an indication of the domestic political dynamics that mattered most to Trump.<sup>156</sup> Three nights later, Trump leaned on narrative themes to explain the troop increase publicly. Admitting “his original instinct was to pull out,” Trump noted, his mind changed because “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists . . . would fill, just as happened before September 11.” Trump then quickly pivoted to Obama: “And as we know, in 2011, America hastily and mistakenly withdrew from Iraq . . . We cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq.”<sup>157</sup> The speech resonated broadly: Fifty-one percent of Americans supported increased troops in Afghanistan, and 71 percent agreed that ISIS would gain if the United States withdrew.<sup>158</sup>

### *The Narrative Declines*

An ideological rival’s debilitating defeat and/or the absence of rival attacks on ideological kin for an extended period are the most likely events to cause a liberal narrative to weaken. In the late 2010s, both happened. As expected, the anti-terrorism narrative lost salience nationally, audience costs of inaction decreased, and political space opened for U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The centerpiece to narrative weakening in the late 2010s was the defeat of the ISIS caliphate in Iraq/Syria along with the continued weakening of al-Qaeda. By late 2018, the ISIS caliphate collapsed (i.e., positive event)—Raqqa and Rawa fell in 2017, ending ISIS territorial control in Iraq, and Hajin (the last ISIS-held town in Syria) fell in 2018. As of 2022, ISIS is a shell of its former self.

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155. Cited in *ibid.*, pp. 256–257.

156. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

157. Donald Trump, “Full Transcript: Trump’s Speech on Afghanistan,” speech at Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia, *New York Times*, August 21, 2017.

158. John Merline, “Trump’s Approval Rating Climbs after ‘Terrible’ August; Most Say Confederate Statues Should Stay: IBD/TIPP Poll,” *Investor’s Business Daily*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.investors.com/politics/trump-approval-rebounds-from-lows-after-charlottesville-harvey-confederate-statues-ibd-tipp-poll/>.



Al-Qaeda is too, having suffered major setbacks after U.S.-led counterterrorism operations decimated its leadership.<sup>159</sup> The ISIS/al-Qaeda decline has also resulted in a major reduction in terrorist attacks. No ISIS-generated mass casualty events have occurred after 2016. Globally, terrorist attacks in 2019 were 59 percent lower than at their peak in 2014, and terrorism deaths fell in 2019 for the fifth consecutive year.<sup>160</sup>

Neither terrorist organization is entirely gone, of course. Terrorist cells have migrated to other places, primarily in Yemen and parts of Africa. The focus of these groups is increasingly more regional than international, however, meaning that the United States and its Western democratic allies, in particular, have become much less of a target.<sup>161</sup> The theory would predict that a robust liberal narrative should have been sustained throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, which the pattern in figure 1 shows was the case (see also the online appendix). In the 2000s, frequent/severe attacks capable of sustaining a robust liberal narrative were a function of how often (at least one attack every two or three years) instead of how many attacks occurred against liberal states. Moreover, an especially traumatic direct attack like September 11 extended the narrative-supporting effects in the years that followed.<sup>162</sup> Regarding the 2018–2021 period, the frequency of ISIS/al-Qaeda attacks against “free” states or the citizens of free states abroad substantially declined relative to the mid-2010s. While these attacks did not completely stop (i.e., Austria 2020, with four casualties), the trend toward reduced negative events, coupled with the even more impactful positive event of the ISIS defeat, marks a distinct shift below the threshold of severe/frequent events necessary to sustain a robust liberal narrative across time. In fact, the event-context of recent years resembles the early 2010s when Obama withdrew troops from Iraq and began withdrawal from Afghanistan. This period was marked by a major positive event—the killing of Osama bin Laden (2011)—and a reduction in negative events with the absence of any attacks on Western democracies from 2008 to 2014.<sup>163</sup>

159. Glenn et al., “Timeline: The Rise.”

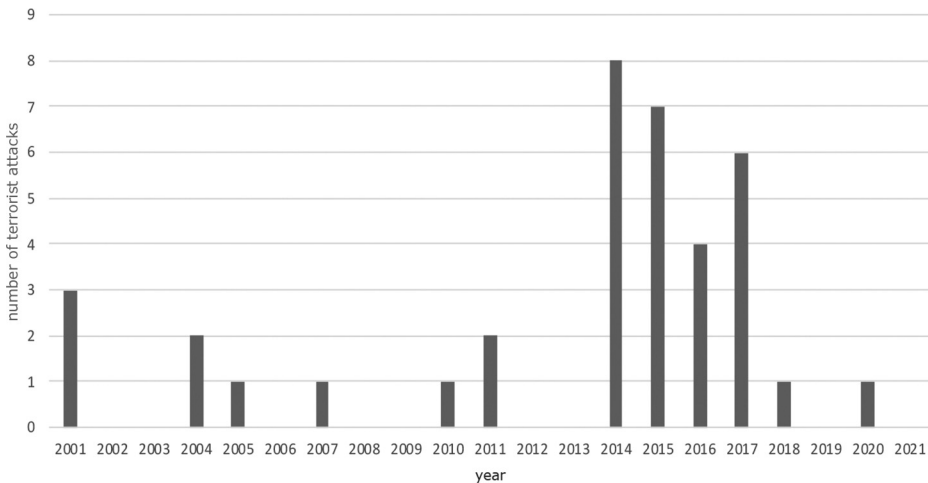
160. *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2020), Vision of Humanity, <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>.

161. Ibid.

162. Al-Qaeda attacks in Iraq (not in figure 1 because Freedom House does not code Iraq as “free”) mattered, too, given the heavy U.S. investment in a liberalizing mission there. These attacks in Iraq totaled fifteen (2005), twenty-two (2007), and twenty-one (2008).

163. The three attacks in 2010 and 2011 occurred in Mali, a non-Western democracy, which cou-

Figure 1. Isis and al-Qaeda Attacks on Free Countries, 2001–2021



SOURCE: *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, March 2022), [https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web\\_110522-1.pdf](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web_110522-1.pdf); and Cameron Glenn et al., “Timeline: The Rise.”

The decrease in severe/frequent events from the late 2010s onward affected the narrative landscape in predicted ways. As expected, it augmented moderator stories of restraint, which appeared in leading narrative indicators. From his bully pulpit as president, Trump was a leading moderator. The fall of Raqqa “represents a critical breakthrough in our worldwide campaign to defeat ISIS and its wicked ideology,” he said in 2018, “the end of the ISIS caliphate is in sight.”<sup>164</sup> He called for retrenchment and said it was “time to come home and rebuild.”<sup>165</sup> Trump repeated these themes through 2020. Democratic presidential candidates did too. In fact, during the 2020 campaign, no candidates aspired to look tough on terrorism, especially in ongoing Middle East wars.<sup>166</sup> Instead, both as a reflection of and a contributing factor to the weak-

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pled with the Osama bin Laden killing made them less impactful on the anti-terrorism narrative. Unlike Iraq, the United States was not actively engaged in a democracy-building mission in Mali, and thus those attacks garnered almost no U.S. news coverage.

164. Glenn et al., “Timeline: The Rise.”

165. Gordon Lubold and Jessica Donati, “Trump Orders Big Troops Reduction in Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2018.

166. Michael Crowley, “Trump’s Campaign Talk of Troop Withdrawals Does Not Match Military

ened liberal narrative, candidates competed mostly over credit for reduced terrorist threats and the best strategy to bring troops home. “Trump’s secret plan to defeat ISIS—you remember that—secret plan to defeat ISIS was just to keep doing what we [Obama-Biden administration] had put in place,” Biden claimed during an Iowa campaign stop.<sup>167</sup> Like others, he also repeatedly associated reduced threats and winding down U.S. wars in the Middle East. The need is to “end forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, which have cost us untold blood and treasure,” Biden said.<sup>168</sup>

At the time of these statements, many experts debated whether terrorism remained a major threat to the United States. Those who warned about the threat of terrorism carried little weight, though, which the strategic-narrative argument would expect. In times of reduced severity/frequency, promoters lose salience and moderators gain salience.

Not surprisingly, then, broad narrative measures indicate that moderator storytelling both fueled and reflected a general decrease in the anti-terrorism narrative starting in 2018. Core elements of the anti-terrorism narrative were almost completely absent among the discussions on Capitol Hill about the following major terrorism/Afghanistan events: the ISIS defeat (March 2019), the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (October 2019), the Afghan peace deal (February 2020), and Trump’s October 2020 Afghanistan withdrawal pledge.<sup>169</sup> Collectively, in the weeks following these events, less than 5 percent of congressional statements mentioned existential dangers of terrorism, and only 15 percent connected current developments to those like September 11, at the heart of the anti-terrorism narrative. Only 35 percent openly advocated continued aggression abroad and/or continued troop deployments to protect against renewed terrorist strikes.

By contrast, moderator discourse abounded, as nearly 60 percent of congressional statements hailed the gains against terrorists. Many talked of the benefits to democracy and civilization, whereas others advocated full withdrawal from the Middle East. Finally, to the extent that the anti-terrorism story

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Reality,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2020. Reflecting the weakened narrative, this public posturing about terrorism was intentional and meant to appeal to voters.

167. Stephen Gruber-Miller, “‘Trump Sold Them Out’: Joe Biden Hits the President over Syria Troop Withdrawal in Iowa Speech,” *Des Moines Register*, October 16, 2019.

168. Crowley, “Trump’s Campaign.”

169. ProQuest search, “ISIS,” “Islamic State,” or “ISIL,” March 23–April 30, 2019; ProQuest search, “Al-Baghdadi,” or “Al Baghdadi,” October 27–November 30, 2019; ProQuest search, “Afghanistan,” February 28–April 30, 2020; and ProQuest search, “Afghanistan,” October 7, 2020–January 19, 2021. See the online appendix for search details.

of old was being told at all, it was not being told that often. Collectively, there were only sixty-six congressional statements in the weeks and months following these events from 2019 to 2020 compared with eighty U.S. congressional statements (with strong storytelling on all narrative elements) in just five days after the 2015 ISIS attacks in Paris.<sup>170</sup>

The effects of decreased severity/frequency on the anti-terrorism narrative showed up on editorial pages too. In each of the three years prior to Biden's April decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, references to "terrorism" on U.S. editorial pages declined by 21 percent (2018–2019), 40 percent (2019–2020), and 66 percent (2020–2021) relative to the annual average number of references over the nine-year period between April 2009 and April 2018, when the anti-terrorism narrative was especially robust. Editorial-page references to "Afghanistan" showed a similar pattern in 2020–2021, with a 60 percent decrease from the annual average between 2008 and 2018. Finally, combining these two terms, references in U.S. editorials to "Afghanistan and terrorism" decreased by 44 percent (2018–2019), 47 percent (2019–2020), and 86 percent (2020–2021) relative to the annual average across the 2008 to 2018 period.<sup>171</sup> This trend is significant: By April 2021, the nationwide discussion found on editorial pages about terrorism and Afghanistan had fallen to its lowest level since 2000, the year before the September 11 terrorist attacks.

More focused editorial surveys also confirm this narrative weakening. After the collapse of the ISIS caliphate and the death of al-Baghdadi, there were only sixteen editorials from ten U.S. newspapers in the month following each event. Compare that with the number of editorials in just ten days after the 2015 Paris (90) and 2008 London (100) terrorist attacks.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, the old anti-terrorism story of existential danger was replaced by the moderator theme of major victory or gains against terrorism (63 percent). The *Chicago Tribune* called the defeat of ISIS "a milestone in the long, arduous fight against post-9/11 extremism."<sup>173</sup> Papers referred to al-Baghdadi's death as a "force disrupter," "important victory for America's antiterror strategy," and a "victory for civili-

170. ProQuest search, "ISIS," "Islamic State," or "ISIL," March 23–May 15, 2019, and October 27–November 30, 2019; and ProQuest search, "Afghanistan," February 28–May 31, 2020, and October 7, 2020–January 19, 2021. See the online appendix for search details.

171. ProQuest search, "Afghanistan," annually from April 13, 2009, through April 13, 2021; ProQuest search, "terrorism," annually from April 13, 2009, through April 13, 2021; and ProQuest search, "Afghanistan and terrorism," annually from April 13, 2009, through April 13, 2021.

172. ProQuest search, "Islamic State," "ISIS," or "ISIL," March 23–April 30, 2019; and ProQuest search, "Al Baghdadi," October 27–November 27, 2019. See the online appendix for search details.

173. "Islamic State's Caliphate Is Dead. The Threat Endures," *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 2019.

zation.”<sup>174</sup> While many (75 percent) supported continuing the fight against terrorism, a collection of editorials that spanned a greater time period showed that talk of the lesson of the anti-terrorism narrative was weak as well. In the sixteen months prior to Biden’s troop-withdrawal announcement, only 32 percent of approximately 130 U.S. editorials about al-Qaeda or ISIS echoed the anti-terrorism narrative’s lesson, to keep up fighting against terrorists. Furthermore, fewer than 1 percent in this broader array of editorials talked of terrorism as a present existential danger (i.e., a challenge to freedom, democracy, or civilization) and only 11 percent (all from the *Wall Street Journal*) linked current events in a foreboding way to past events at the center of the anti-terrorism story.<sup>175</sup> Polls show the same trends. While Americans still worry about terrorism, a 2019 survey found that, relative to other challenges, only 1 percent considered terrorism or ISIS to be the greatest future threat to the United States.<sup>176</sup>

Finally, these same patterns of liberal narrative weakness were evident around the question of Afghanistan specifically. Only ten editorials appeared in U.S. newspapers in the two months after the 2020 announcement of a peace deal and only fourteen in the three months after Trump’s 2020 announced withdrawal.<sup>177</sup> With ISIS defeated and the frequency of attacks declining (see figure 1), the story came rarely to the fore. In 2009 and 2017, talk of a military drawdown in Afghanistan would have sparked a mighty narrative-based outburst: worries about another 9/11, dangers to Western democracy, and the like. But this did not occur in 2020. After Trump’s 2020 announcement of withdrawal, no editorials framed events in existential terms, and only one of the twenty-four editorials connected the present development to past narrative-based events.

Instead, moderator themes dominated. While many noted the challenges to a peaceful settlement, eighteen of twenty-four editorials welcomed the Taliban peace deal, and more than a third unequivocally supported near-term or im-

174. “The U.S. Delivers Justice to al-Baghdadi,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 28, 2019; “The Lessons of Baghdadi,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2019; and “The Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” *USA Today*, October 29, 2019.

175. ProQuest search, “Al-Qaeda,” “Islamic State,” “ISIS,” or “ISIL,” December 1–April 13, 2021, N=132, 25 newspapers.

176. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions,” Pew Research Center, August 13, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/>. Twenty-four percent of respondents cited China or Russia.

177. ProQuest search, “Afghanistan,” February 28–April 30, 2020, N=10, 8 newspapers and October 7, 2020–January 19, 2021, N=14, 10 newspapers.

mediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. “The Trump administration was right to open negotiations with the Taliban and . . . reduce the number of U.S. forces,” noted the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>178</sup> Another called the deal “a ticket out of Afghanistan for American troops who’ve been there far too long,” adding that “recognizing when a fight has become useless is the right thing to do.”<sup>179</sup> Many criticized Trump’s approach, especially his push for a hasty 2020 withdrawal (nine of fourteen editorials opposed this approach, in fact). Reflecting the narrative moment, though, the reasons given included the need for a careful policy review first, potential damage to the peace process, or the need to leave the decision to Biden rather than to fight terrorism (i.e., the liberal narrative).

Polls also showed the narrative trends around Afghanistan policy. Figure 2 tracks the annual average of public opinion support for maintaining or increasing U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2021 (see the online appendix). Changes over time reflect what the strategic-narrative argument would expect. For the 2018–2021 period, as severity/frequency of events decreased because of ISIS/al-Qaeda’s decline and reduced attacks on free countries, public support for troop presence in Afghanistan dropped substantially as well. Support fell below 50 percent in 2019—the year after the ISIS defeat and the second year of reduced attacks (figure 1)—then plunged to around 30 percent in 2020 and 2021. “Americans are in a sour mood,” the *Wall Street Journal* observed in 2020, “The desire to come home is understandable.”<sup>180</sup> In sum, at the same time that events weakened the anti-terrorism narrative, national support for the war in Afghanistan fell as well, in line with the strategic-narrative argument.

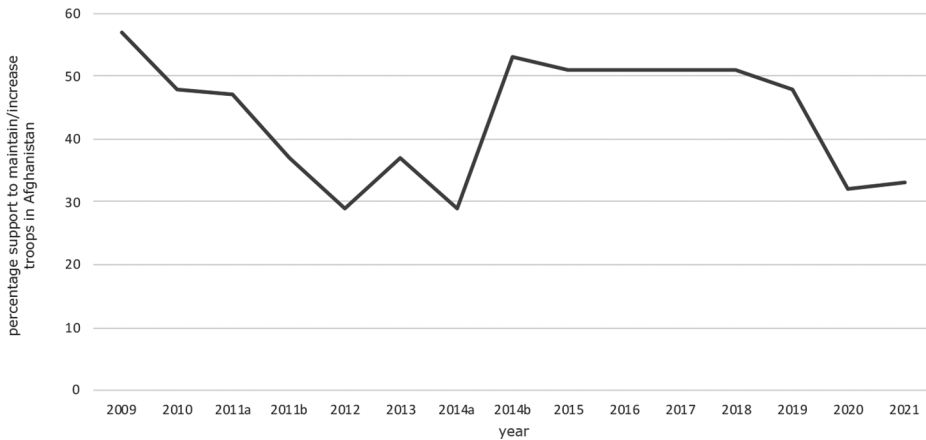
Earlier trends in figure 2 also support the strategic-narrative argument. As discussed previously, amid a robust liberal narrative sustained by severe/frequent attacks, public support for troops in Afghanistan was close to 60 percent in 2009. Support remained around 50 percent through April 2011 (see 2011a in figure 2), before dropping sharply, as expected, following the May death of bin Laden (i.e., positive event) and reduced frequency of attacks into the early 2010s. After bin Laden’s death, 55 percent said they were “not worried” that troop withdrawals from Afghanistan would make the United States

178. “Deal with the Taliban the Price to Pay,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 29, 2020.

179. “A War Without Winners Winds Down,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2020.

180. “The Afghan Withdrawal Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2020.

Figure 2. Public Opinion Support to Maintain or Increase Troops in Afghanistan



SOURCE: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *iPoll Database* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University), <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/>. See the online appendix for a list of specific polls.

“more vulnerable to terrorist attacks.”<sup>181</sup> Unsurprisingly for this narrative context, Obama announced a timetable in 2012 for a complete withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.<sup>182</sup> As expected, opinion shifted again with the mid-2014 resurgence of the anti-terrorism narrative amid the severe/frequent attacks by ISIS. Change actually came mid-year, tracking closely (as expected) with the surge in the anti-terrorism narrative following ISIS gains in Iraq/Syria—support for troops in Afghanistan jumped from 29 percent in early 2014 to 53 percent by December. Poll numbers remained around 50 percent until 2019.

In general, the evidence presented here offers strong support for the strategic-narrative argument. Overall, by early 2021, the anti-terrorism narrative, with its worries of another September 11 stemming from Afghanistan, was largely gone, a casualty of de-traumatizing events. In its place was “public

181. Jeffrey M. Jones, “In U.S., Fears of Terrorism after Afghanistan Pullout Subside,” *Gallup*, June 29, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/148331/Fear-Terrorism-Afghanistan-Pullout-Subside.aspx>.

182. Malkasian, *The American War*, pp. 395–396. Again, as expected, Obama reversed this with the rise of ISIS.

apathy,” according to commentators, meaning that regarding Afghanistan, “many Americans . . . lost track of what this war . . . is, or was, about.”<sup>183</sup>

#### BIDEN’S 2021 WITHDRAWAL

President Biden’s decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan is not explained by a realpolitik calculation of the national interest. Biden’s two immediate predecessors believed that the national interest dictated withdrawal. What allowed Biden to follow through in ways that Obama and Trump could not? The objective national interest argument cannot answer this puzzle. Narrative politics can, however.

When a liberal narrative weakens, the discourses that form around it tend to be weak as well. In turn, space opens up and pressure sometimes builds for greater military restraint and retrenchment—audience costs of inaction decline and costs of action rise. Such developments occurred in early 2021 around the U.S. policy in Afghanistan, helping explain Biden’s decision for withdrawal.

After taking office, Biden did not face the liberal-narrative pressure that his two predecessors had experienced. There was little public discourse by promoters leading up to his decision on Afghanistan: only two statements (one prowar, one antiwar) in the *Congressional Record*, and just nine editorials (four from the *Wall Street Journal*) on Afghan policy.<sup>184</sup> Talk of another September 11 or threats to democracy (i.e., narrative components) were nonexistent. Many pundits acknowledged popular sentiments to leave and, in bowing to that sentiment, endorsed doing so eventually. “Americans are understandably eager to move on,” conceded the traditionally hawkish *Wall Street Journal*, “The question is not whether the U.S. will leave Afghanistan but whether it will do so responsibly.”<sup>185</sup> In February 2021, 79 percent of Americans considered continued U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan mostly or very unfavorably.<sup>186</sup>

In internal debates, military promoters continued to press for staying in Afghanistan. In late March meetings with the president, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Mark Milley, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and others issued a bleak post-withdrawal forecast, warning of Taliban and al-Qaeda resurgence and de-

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183. Sarah Kreps and Douglas Kriner, “In or Out of Afghanistan Is Not a Political Choice,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2001, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-03-22/or-out-afghanistan-not-political-choice>; and Charles Lane, “An Afghan Exit with Shades of Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 2020.

184. ProQuest search, “Afghanistan,” January 20–April 13, 2021, N=9, 6 newspapers.

185. “Leaving Afghanistan the Right Way,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2021.

186. Mohamed Younis, “China, Russia Images in U.S. Hit Historic Lows,” *Gallup*, March 1, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/331082/china-russia-images-hit-historic-lows.aspx>.



riding “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism.<sup>187</sup> Unlike during the Obama and Trump years, military leaders did not plan to go public because they knew they had nothing to go public with. Senator Graham, the longtime promoter who worked closely with the military to orchestrate past narrative-based pressure campaigns, openly admitted in an interview that “I hate Joe Biden for this.”<sup>188</sup> He then added, “I think the Taliban is going to give safe haven to people that will come after us.”<sup>189</sup> Yet in sharp contrast to his advice to Petraeus and McChrystal in 2009, he conceded that the new political/narrative reality left him and other military promoters with no leverage. “The American people want us to come home,” Graham confessed, “People are tired.”<sup>190</sup>

Milley admitted to the tipping effect that this narrative shift had on the civil-military balance. Biden would fire any military brass (“they’re going to be gone”)<sup>191</sup> who went public, Milley said, which was a move that Obama was highly unlikely to have made (or threaten) in 2009, amid a different narrative context (and, thus, a different civil-military balance).<sup>192</sup> Milley further explained that because the military used tactics to expand what became a progressively unpopular war in Afghanistan early in the Obama administration, military leaders were subsequently excluded from major decisions (such as withdrawal from Iraq and troop reductions in Afghanistan). He wanted no repeat of that. “We don’t box in a president,” he said.<sup>193</sup> Biden intentionally worked to avoid a repeat of this dynamic as well. He chose Austin as secretary of defense because, based on his service under Obama, Biden trusted Austin to keep promoters in the military from making public statements. Throughout the 2021 debate on Afghanistan, Austin prevented the Joint Chiefs of Staff from “going rogue,” according to one official. In the end, and in sharp contrast to 2009, no top military brass went public.<sup>194</sup> The weakened anti-terrorism narrative had left military promoters no other choice. In essence, a weak liberal discourse in public kept costs of inaction low, leaving Biden (and other civilian

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187. Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, *Peril* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), pp. 377–379.

188. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 389.

189. *Ibid.*

190. *Ibid.* Going back to at least the Obama administration, Lindsey Graham was always in close contact with military leaders, especially the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

191. Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, p. 335.

192. *Ibid.*, pp. 386–387.

193. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

194. Lara Seligman et al., “How Biden’s Team Overrode the Brass on Afghanistan,” *Politico*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/14/pentagon-biden-team-overrode-afghanistan-481556>.

policy experts) more political space—something Obama preferred but never found—to choose a full withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The Afghan debate was extensive—four NSC and ten deputy-level meetings—with much attention centered on the terror threat from Afghanistan.<sup>195</sup> Biden and his closest advisers eventually concluded that the threat was “relatively small” or “manageable” (in fact, back to pre-9/11 levels) for the foreseeable future.<sup>196</sup> Regarding the strategic-narrative argument, Biden deemed it unlikely that severe or frequent attacks (i.e., those capable of re-traumatizing the nation and increasing politically damaging costs of inaction) would develop any time soon. According to officials, Biden talked often about the “lessons of Iraq” under Obama. Specifically, Biden concluded that the weak Afghan terror threat meant that offshore methods were sufficient to avoid a repeat of the domestic political damage that Obama faced with the rise of ISIS after the 2011 Iraq drawdown. For Biden, potential low severity and frequency moving forward meant a weak liberal discourse moving forward as well. With low future costs of inaction, Biden found, again, more space for withdrawal. In fact, as opinion crystalized around modest future threats from terrorism, Biden focused increasingly on his campaign promises, reminding his advisers that like his two predecessors, he pledged to end the war in Afghanistan.<sup>197</sup>

As the strategic-narrative argument expects, Biden felt (again, in a way that his predecessors did not) that he would also face considerable audience costs of action if he chose not to fulfill his campaign pledge to leave Afghanistan. The Taliban curtailed all attacks on U.S. forces after the February 2020 peace deal, resulting in no U.S. casualties in Afghanistan in the year before Biden’s inauguration. The administration concluded that staying in Afghanistan after May 1, with no plan to leave, would inevitably mean a resumption of fighting and increased casualties. A senior official noted that “if we break the May 1st

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195. Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, “With Afghanistan, Biden Restores Foreign Policymaking Process that Trump Abandoned,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 2021; David Ignatius, “History Will Cast a Shadow over Biden’s Decision to Withdraw from Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2021; and Jennifer Rubin, “Afghanistan Requires More Humility—from Everyone,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2021.

196. Rubin, “Afghanistan Requires More Humility”; Seligman et al., “How Biden’s Team Overrode”; and Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, “Biden Will Withdraw All U.S. Forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2021.

197. Stephen Collinson and Maeve Reston, “Biden Starts to Execute on Policies Trump Abandoned by Crossing off Another Campaign Promise,” *CNN*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/15/politics/joe-biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal/index.html>.

deadline negotiated by the previous administration with no clear exit plan, we will be back at the war with the Taliban.”<sup>198</sup> If so, Biden would then need to go one step further and increase troops because 3,000 was, according to expert opinion, insufficient to fight the Taliban.<sup>199</sup> For a president who not only promised to end the war but also now faced (unlike his predecessors early in their terms) narrative-driven public opposition to the war, costs of action were simply too high. “New U.S. casualties after a one-year hiatus under Trump could be a political disaster,” noted an insider, “That was the last thing Biden wanted.”<sup>200</sup> It would mean “staying in Afghanistan forever,” said one Biden aide, alluding to the dangers of these costs.<sup>201</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that, in sharp contrast to the Obama/Trump cases, moderators (all civilians) played an outsized role under Biden. According to administration sources, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan—both longtime aides of Biden and critics of the war (especially Sullivan)—were “truly running the Pentagon,” with the “Pentagon [i.e., promoters] not making these decisions.” According to a lawmaker familiar with the process, “The civilian leaders essentially overruled the generals on this.”<sup>202</sup> Such an outcome is to be expected in a policymaking context marked by a weak liberal discourse.

In an April 14 public statement, Biden explained his decision in narrative-based terms that the nation understood. “Our reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear,” Biden said, “We went to Afghanistan because of a horrific attack that happened twenty years ago. That cannot explain why we should remain there in 2021.”<sup>203</sup> Editors at the *Washington Post* called Biden’s decision to leave the “easy way out of Afghanistan.”<sup>204</sup> They were right. When a long-standing liberal narrative collapses as a lodestar for costly endeavors like war, politicians often choose the easy way. They leave. To do otherwise simply costs too much.

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198. Ryan and DeYoung, “Biden Will Withdraw All.”

199. “The Way Forward in Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2021. The Afghan Study Group recommended an increase of troops.

200. Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, p. 384.

201. Ignatius, “History Will Cast a Shadow.”

202. All cited in Seligman et al., “How Biden’s Team Overrode.”

203. Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” remarks from the Treaty Room, White House, April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

204. “Biden Takes the Easy Way Out of Afghanistan. The Likely Result Is Disaster,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2021.

## Conclusion

For nearly two decades, U.S. foreign policy was locked in the iron cage of a robust liberal narrative, centered around anti-terrorism. Born out of the trauma of September 11 and sustained by terrorist attacks in the years after, the narrative and politics around U.S. foreign policy kept audience costs of inaction high, which prevented withdrawal from Afghanistan and brought U.S. forces back to Iraq and into Syria. Presidents Obama and Trump calculated that withdrawal was rational or strategic, but the pressure of narrative politics foreclosed that option. From 2018 to 2021, the severity/frequency of terrorist attacks declined significantly, the anti-terrorism narrative weakened, audience costs of inaction declined, and costs of action rose. Only in these narrative-driven conditions did Trump (late in his presidency) and Biden find space to draw down from Afghanistan. In sum, the strategic-narrative argument offers a strong account for both the length and end of the war in Afghanistan, especially against other leading arguments in international relations.

For the United States (and its allies) moving forward, these findings point to two important strategic implications—one in the direction of continued vigilance abroad, the other in the direction of restraint. First, as the United States shifts attention away from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and focuses more on great power competition (i.e., China and Russia), U.S. policymakers cannot turn their backs on terrorism.<sup>205</sup> Doing so risks a resurgence of ISIS/al-Qaeda that will re-traumatize the U.S. public, reanimate the anti-terrorism narrative, and create the kind of costs-of-inaction politics that led to the decades-long, overly expansive U.S. military engagements in the Middle East. Continued vigilance against terrorism is vital, then, to keep the home front quiet and, with that, to avoid strategic overstretch (such as the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq) and to maintain focus on the more pressing matter today of great power politics.

Second, the findings here also point to new standards that the United States should apply to counterterrorism operations going forward. When it comes to narrative-animating terrorist strikes—the kinds that are most likely to push U.S. leaders toward expansive military action—U.S. citizens do not care about

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205. Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "How the U.S. Plans to Fight from Afar after Troops Exit Afghanistan," *New York Times*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/us/politics/united-states-al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>. Biden appears keen to the fact that vigilance against terrorism is important.

any and all forms of terrorism. In fact, they are quite discriminating. As a recent example, consider the ISIS-K (Islamic State-Khorasan Province) attack at the Kabul airport during the U.S. evacuation in August 2021. The attack caused a major uproar across the United States, contributing to the negative opinion that most U.S. citizens had of Biden's handling of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. But, as polls demonstrated, that Kabul attack (and other developments, like the Taliban victory in Afghanistan) did not generate a resurgence in the anti-terrorism narrative and with that a reversal of Biden's drawdown decision.<sup>206</sup> The reason? ISIS-K is almost exclusively a local threat, focused on Afghanistan primarily. It has no capacity (or will, for that matter) to strike the United States or its liberal democratic allies, especially those in the West. U.S. citizens understand this. U.S. policymakers need to do the same, and on this basis, show greater restraint in developing counterterrorism policy.

To this end, terrorists of global reach—meaning those with both the will and the means to strike liberal states beyond the territories that they currently occupy—can and should become the central focus of U.S. counterterrorism policy. These kinds of terrorists represent the real threats to U.S. security, both materially and in their narrative-generating potential. The global-reach standard is at the center of President Biden's post-Afghan over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy. The same standard needs to be applied more broadly.

There is much work to do. Global-reach terrorist organizations are fewer and far less potent than they were in the early 2010s. The decimation of the central leadership of al-Qaeda and ISIS has resulted in a decentralization of both organizations, which includes turning away from global objectives and targets and focusing more on "parochial grievances and the promotion of . . . local interests," according to one study. In sum, "The deck is heavily stacked against transnational jihadi groups."<sup>207</sup>

Unfortunately, U.S. policy has not fully adjusted to this reality. Above all else, too little distinction is made today in U.S. policy circles between local and global terrorists. Consequently, the United States finds itself involved in an ex-

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206. Ted Van Green and Carroll Doherty, "Majority of U.S. Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized for His Handling of Situation," Pew Research Center, August 31, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/>.

207. Barak Mendelsohn and Colin Clarke, "Al-Qaeda Is Being Hollowed to Its Core," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/al-qaeda-is-being-hollowed-to-its-core/>.

pansive web of relatively low-level counterterrorism operations across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that involve everything from special forces raids to joint military exercises and air/drone strikes.<sup>208</sup> Some of this activity—such as repeated strikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the 2010s and perhaps even against ISIS in Syria in 2022—is justified by global-reach standards. Much of it is not, however. For all its brutality, Boko Haram in Nigeria, for instance, is a terror organization with local interests only. This does not mean, of course, that the United States should ignore Boko Haram and others like it—after all, local threats can sometimes become global. Surveillance, intelligence sharing, and sometimes counterterrorism training with local partners and governments are important. But the United States should pare back its direct use of force against local terrorist groups. In these instances, force contributes little to U.S. security and runs the risk of escalation in ways that (like in Afghanistan) drain valuable strategic resources.<sup>209</sup>

The lessons learned from a deeper understanding of strategic narratives point to the need for a robust counterterrorism program today, that is, by the same token, far less expansive and militaristic than that of the past two decades. Striking this counterterrorism balance—that is, not too little, not too much—will help manage narrative politics at home and, in turn, allow the United States to not only maintain its own security but also contribute in positive ways to order and stability in a world marked by the exigencies of renewed great power competition.

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208. Stephanie Savell, *United States Counterterrorism Operations, 2018–2020* (Providence, R.I.: Watson Institute, Brown University, 2021), <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/US%20Counterterrorism%20Operations%202018-2020%2C%20Costs%20of%20War.pdf>.

209. *Ibid.*